ピアノの森 22

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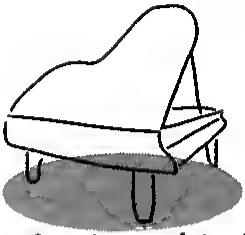
ISSHIKI Makoto

The Perfect World of KAI

22



The Perfect World of KAI

22

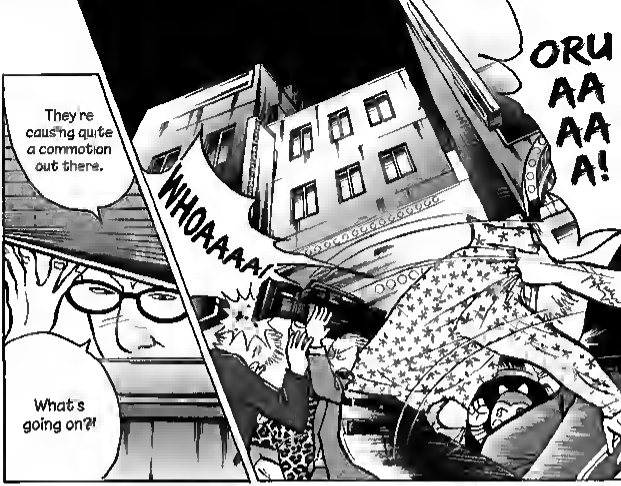
CONTENTS

Chapter 196	Ichinose and the Edge of the Forest	3
Chapter 197	Glamorous Music	27
Chapter 198	Proposal Rhapsody	51
Chapter 199	Japanese Conference in Warsaw	75
Chapter 200	Midnight Stroll in Warsaw	99
Chapter 201	Morning in the Forest of Chopin	123
Chapter 202	The Reason He Changed His Piece	147
Chapter 203	"What?"	159
Chapter 204	The "Truth" About Wei Pang	185
Chapter 205	Ajino-sensei	215

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION
ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PEOPLE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND/OR EVENTS IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL.

Chapter 196

Ichinose and the Edge of the Forest


They're causing quite a commotion out there.
What's going on?!
WHOAAAA!
ORU AA AA A!

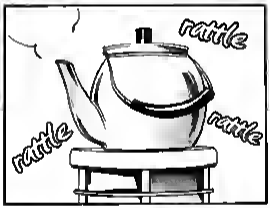
Sorry fer the fuss!!!
What's go n on?!

What... what should we do with em?!
Some of our young ones roughed up some foreigners with cameras...

Anyway, bring 'em all here.
Foreigners? With cameras? Are they tourists?

Or would it be better to ask what group you guys are from ...?
So, where are you guys from?

Ah... actually we can't understand a word they're saying...
See, we beat the crap outta the Chinese guy they had as an interpreter...
Right now the doc's patching him up...

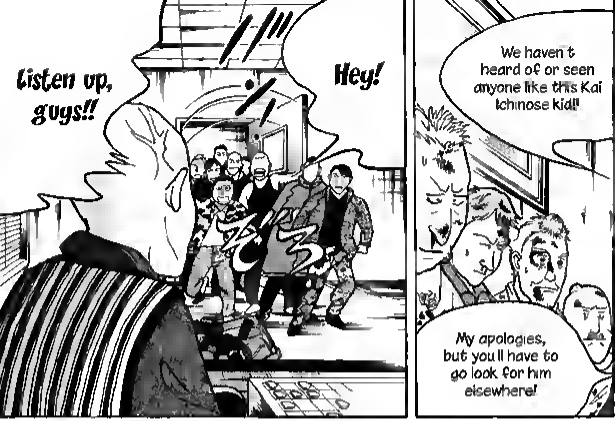

rattle
rattle
rattle

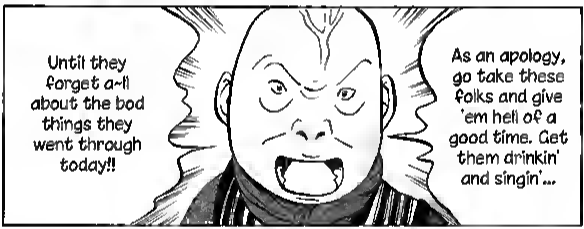
That professor can speak just about any language like a native.
We have a translator of our own.

So what you're saying is...

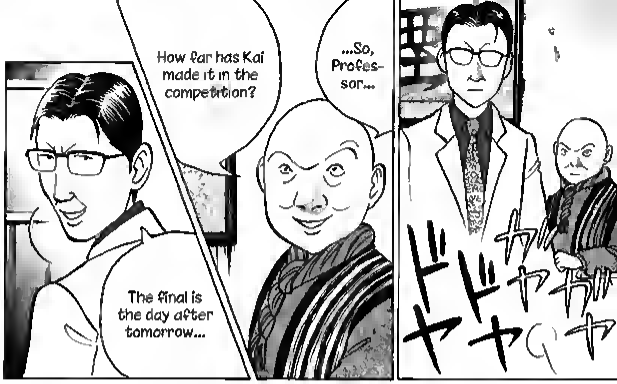
Actually, there were five...
This Japanese kid Kai Ichinose is becoming a big name in this Chopin Competition in Warsaw... so you've come all the way here to investigate his hometown?
The four of you, plus your Chinese translator.
Man, that was close~..
Or maybe 'cuz I wasn't holding a camera? Whatever it was, I was saved...
Dunno if it was 'cuz my hair is black... Or 'cuz I'm so short...
Haa
Haa
Haa
W...Wait, that's right. We've agreed on this... If... if we can't sell a video right away, just throw it up on Youtube!!
I... I just gotta run away for now...
If I can just hold on to these recordings... The guys who got caught can rest easy

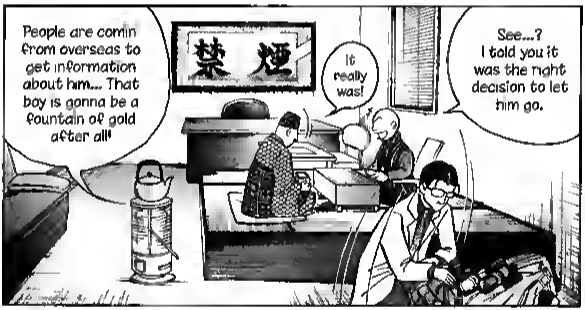
Well- I guess I'd better apologize. Sorry for all that~...
Ahahaha...
Blah blah blah...
Blah blah...
See, a lot of the guys around here go crazy if they see a camera pointing their way.
Sorry you had to get roughed up like that.
So this is the kind of place where folks come to drink, fight and sell themselves... a red-light district...
A little rich boy who plays the piano has nothing to do with a place like this.

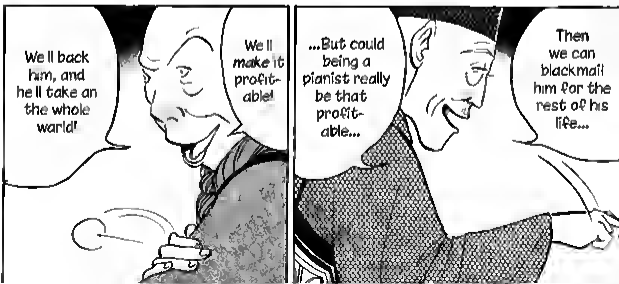

Listen up, guys!!
Hey!
We haven't heard of or seen anyone like this Kai Ichinose kid!
My apologies, but you'll have to go look for him elsewhere!


Until they forget a~ll about the bad things they went through today!!
As an apology, go take these folks and give 'em hell of a good time. Get them drinkin' and singin'...

What kind of reaction is that?
Whoa...
Leave it to us~!!!!


How far has Kai made it in the competition?
...So, Profes-sor...
The final is the day after tomorrow...
ドヤドヤ


People are comin from overseas to get information about him... That boy is gonna be a fountain of gold after all!
禁煙
It really was!
See...? I told you it was the right decision to let him go.


We'll back him, and he'll take an the whole world!
We'll make it profit-able!
...But could being a pianist really be that profit-able...
Then we can blackmail him for the rest of his life...

We can't have foreign reporters barging in like this.
Locals give this place a wide berth, but...
But that's only possible because our power is rooted in the Edge of the Forest.
If they come at us up front, we'll just slip things by underground... We can run a nice, respectable company on the surface, is all.
We won't have to worry about any laws or rules!
煙

Gaining the attention of the world could be disastrous for us here at the Edge.
...Unfortunately, foreigners have no respect for local sensibilities. If we don't do something about this...

That Kai is not from around these parts!
...In any case, we need to make it clear to people...

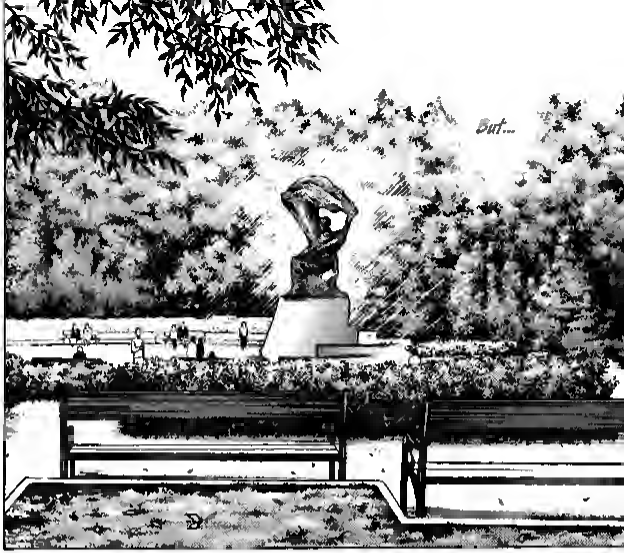
...We had no idea...
...At that time...

...What was happening

Even though it's barely 1 o'clock...
Today's practice was pretty exhausting!
BEEP

CHOPIN ACADEMY (THE FRYDERYK CHOPIN UNIVERSITY OF MUSIC)

About 10 or 11am, I think...
When's your final rehearsal?
That's true! It's time we synced our sleeping schedule with the competition time table...
But if you go home and get some sleep right now, your body's internal clock should get back to normal!
You're just tired because you were way too excited during the first half of our practice!
Yeah, that's the place!
Chopin's forest?
At Łazienki Park.
Then let's meet up at 10 tomorrow,
I got the feeling that I'd run into Lech...
I didn't visit Chopin's forest today...


But...

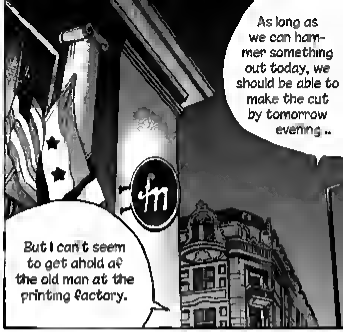
This forest is seriously the greatest!!

If the competition were held out here instead, you'd totally win!
Ahaha... you're right! I wonder if they'd do that for me!!
Ahaha... This forest really suits you, Kai!
You have a ton of experience with performing outdoors, don't you?
I have practically none at all...
Would you like to try being a clown, Amamiya?
Huh? Think I could do it?
You totally could! But are you okay with it?
What do you mean?
Well, I think the classical world wouldn't care too much for it!
Problems kept cropping up one after the other...
.....
Ahaha...

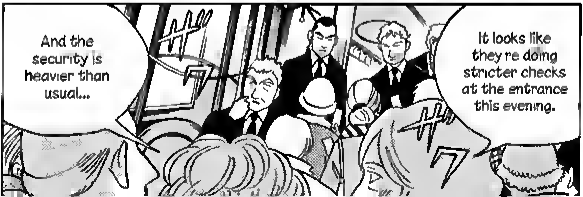
In places I knew about, and places I didn't...
~~~!!!!
!!!
Look, David, look!! No matter how many times I've watched it, it gives me the shivers!!
Look!! They got Pecker!!
~~~

And here I thought he was completely useless, but I swear he was born just for this moment!
Tasker, you're so cute!
Tearing his clothes, throwing in a knee...
And those punches...
But nothing went wrong.
I mean, they all got released in the end. Quit whining!
Victoria, we need to get ourselves out of this mess!
If anything else goes wrong...
Though... It seems that Ichinose really has nothing to do with this 'Edge of the Forest'.
But at this point, even if we have to make something up, we need to have this article ready by morning!
What?

Hmm?


As long as we can hammer something out today, we should be able to make the cut by tomorrow evening...
But I can't seem to get ahold of the old man at the printing factory.

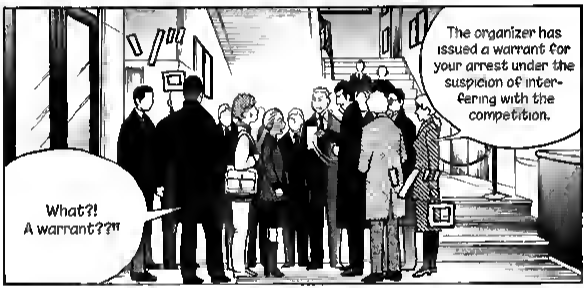
PHILHARMONIC HALL
DAY 3 FINALS
What is with this crowd?!
It's already past 5. They still haven't started admitting the audience?


And the security is heavier than usual...
It looks like they're doing stricter checks at the entrance this evening.

Well, anyway...
I'll be in and out of the hall today, so I'm counting on you!
David, looks like things are jam-packed on this end. Let's go in from the back.
Through the staff entrance

Something wrong with that?!
Victoria Campbell and David Smith, I presume?

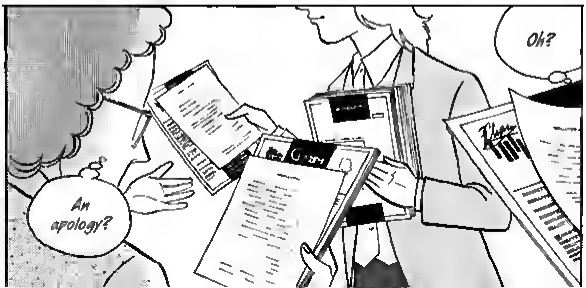
What? What are you talking about?
You two are not to set foot in this building!

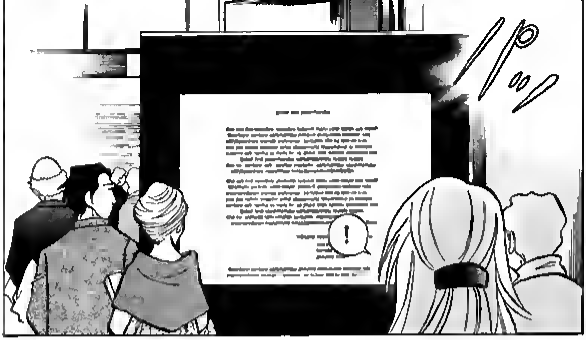

The organizer has issued a warrant for your arrest under the suspicion of interfering with the competition.
What?! A warrant??!!

We'll want to hear all about this back at the Warsaw police station.

We've got them!
We've got the suspects!
We've got them!

Great! I thought there wouldn't be any today!
Oh! They're handing out the gazettes over there!


Oh?
An apology?



Official Notice
Formal Apology

Recently, copies of a counterfeit gazette deliberately designed to resemble the official gazette was being circulated under the title, "The Truth About Wei Pang".

The article was fabricated by a certain media outlet with financial profit in mind, and the information therein is deemed to be false.

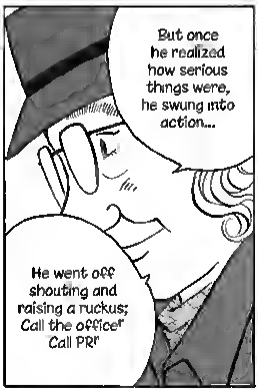
It was not in our intention to violate the privacy of any contestant in this competition.

As the organizer of this competition, we deeply regret our inability to prevent the incident from transpiring. Please accept our most sincere apologies.

Marek Buzek
Director of the
Fryderyk Chopin Institute

※ Copies of the counterfeit gazettes have already been recovered.

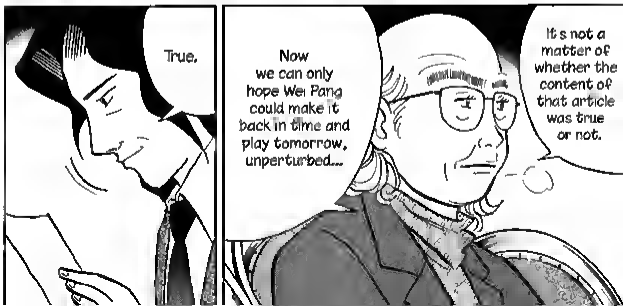
Director Buzek wasted no time.

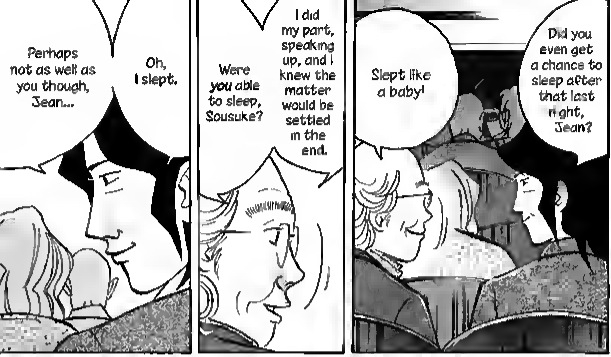

But once he realized how serious things were, he swung into action...
He went off shouting and raising a ruckus; Call the officer! Call PR!

I knocked on his door and woke him up in the middle of the night... For a moment there he was so angry I thought our friendship of 30 years would go up in smoke...

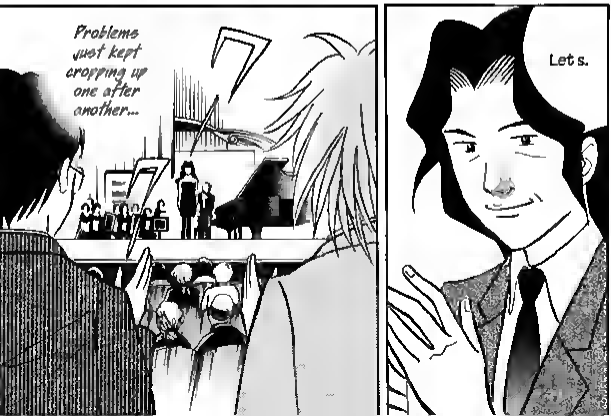
I hear he mobilized everyone to conduct a search first thing in the morning...
Got a hold on all the printing factories in town...
Once they locked onto the one in question, it was a simple matter to trace the order, and all that's left was to wait for the culprit to fall into the trap.

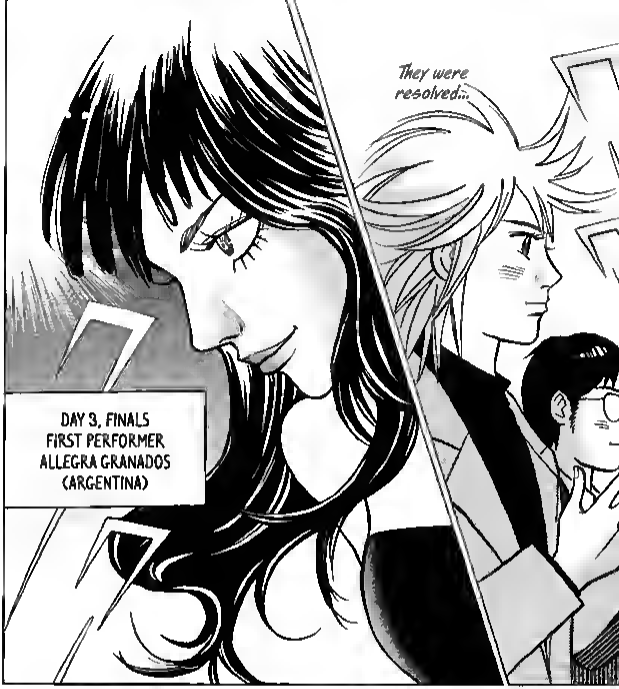
Some nasty tabloid reporters seemed to have slithered their way into the competition.
Poland treats this competition every bit as seriously as receiving guests on state visits. Anyone who tries to throw a wrench in it will learn it the hard way.


It's not a matter of whether the content of that article was true or not.
Now we can only hope Wei Pang could make it back in time and play tomorrow, unperturbed....
True.


Perhaps not as well as you though, Jean...
Oh, I slept.
Were you able to sleep, Sousuke?
I did my part, speaking up, and I knew the matter would be settled in the end.
Slept like a baby!
Did you even get a chance to sleep after that last night, Jean?

For now, let s just settle down and enjoy the competition.
Well .. I suppose ..


Problems just kept cropping up one after another...
Let s.


They were resolved...
DAY 3, FINALS
FIRST PERFORMER
ALLEGRA GRANADOS
(ARGENTINA)

Then started spreading...
JAPANESE MAFIA?
EDGE OF THE FOREST
VIEWS 273,803
Ichinose and The Edge of the Forest END

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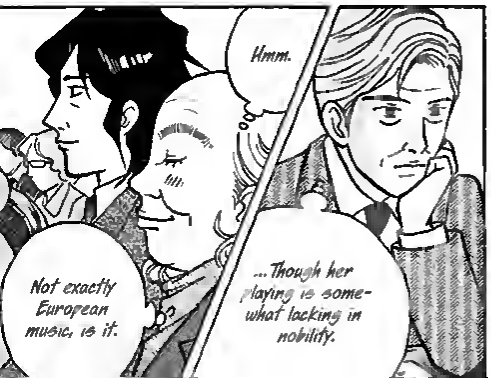
Easy Going Scans
Artwork from "Piano no Mori"

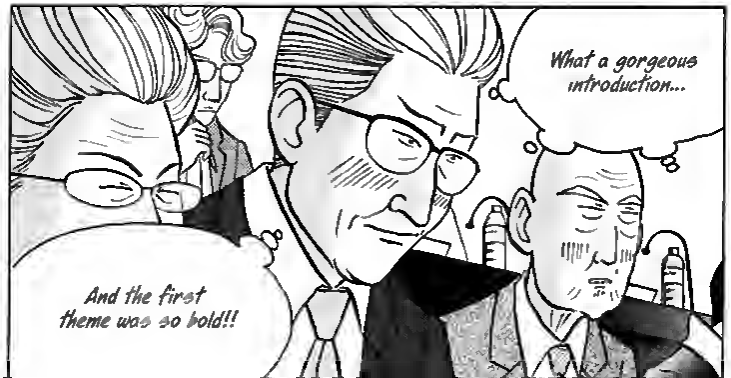
Chapter 197

GLAMOROUS MUSIC

DAY 3. FINALS
FIRST PERFORMER
ALLEGRA GRANADOS
(ARGENTINA)


Hmm.
Not exactly European music, is it.
...Though her playing is somewhat lacking in nobility.

Such exceptional technique!!
Flexible wrists and strong fingers...


What a gorgeous introduction...
And the first theme was so bold!!

Allegra Granados...

He thought Granado's playing...
The first time he heard her play...

According to my father...

Could rival Wei Pang's... or Theiss'. She could be a candidate for the first place...
PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1
IN E MINOR OP. 11
FIRST MOVEMENT
ALLEGRO MAESTOSO

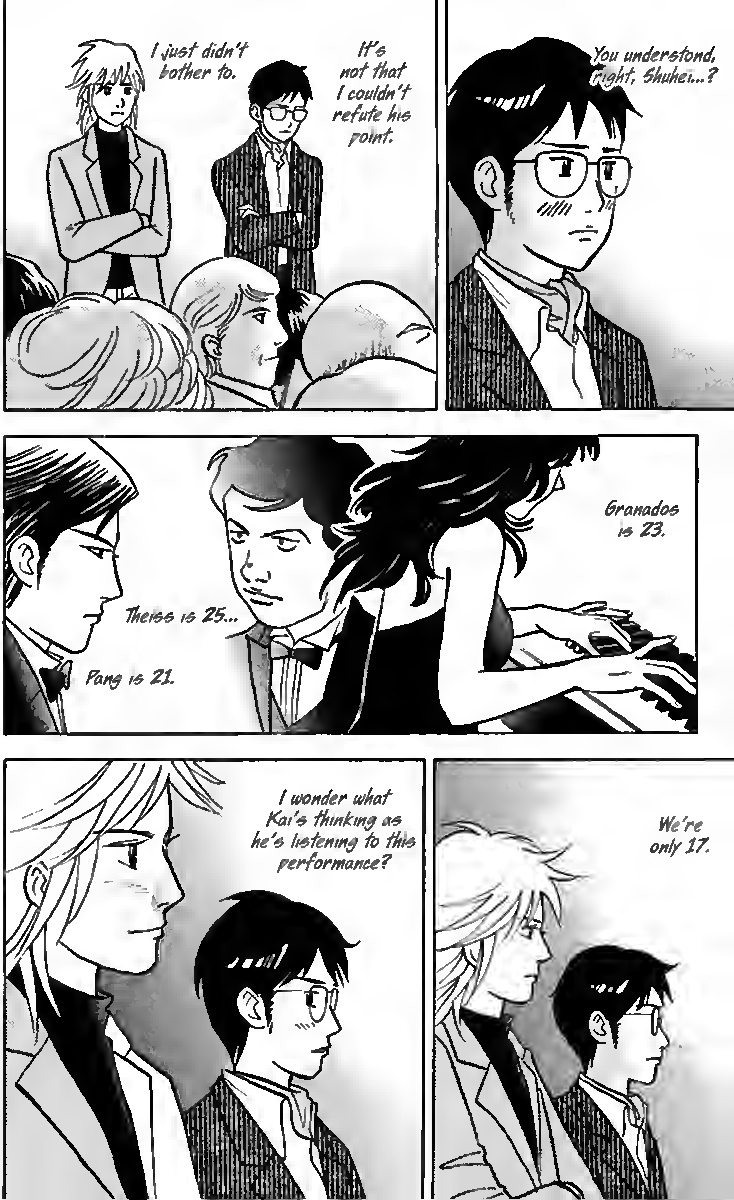
Her playing really is at a high level... and very intense.
Of course, I'm sure my father was just surprised at the time, but...

Still insists that Kai can't win this competition!
But despite that, father...
However, if Kai plays like he does at our practices, he can definitely match this level!
"17 years old is far, far too young! He's still just a child."
"First of all, he's too young."
Even if Ichinose really is a one-in-a-million diamond in the rough.
He's just not quite ripe yet!

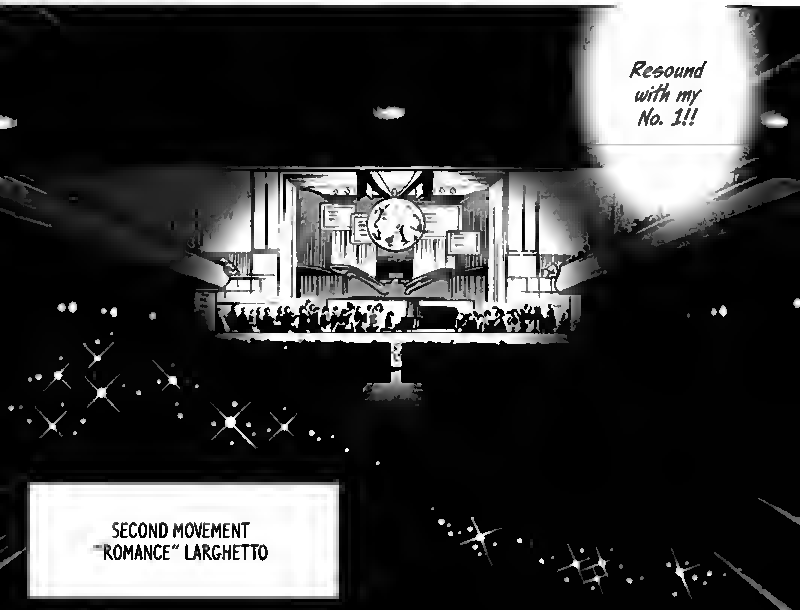
Not that again...
Not...
That's just a testament to the weakness of the competitors left in those finals.
...But there have been people who won at the age of 18 before.
Besides, there is a big difference between 18 and 17.
The age at which someone finally grows from a child to an adult.
Of course it differs from person to person..
18 and 19, 19 and 20. They're all big steps.
That gap of 1 year is huge.

That was a time when life was fleeting! Back then, every day was a dance with death. It would be nonsense to compare these days to the past!
Ahaha... That was a different era...
Well, he took over as Chief of his family when he was 17! He was a Lord at 17!
Father, you're a huge fan of Oda Nobunaga, right?
mutter
That was as far as I could argue the point.
No matter how much you think Ichinose has been through, he hasn't literally been fighting for his life.
Obviously everyone's going to get emotional and pile on the praise for the child.
Let's say you've got a kid who is a genius at singing!
Listen...
.....

No matter how talented they are... How can they fill a song with emotions they can't even imagine?
But how do you think they'd fare in a contest, singing songs about adult feelings of lost love and regrets...?
It's the same with the piano!
Even if the quality of the sound they produce is somewhat lacking only an adult with an understanding of those emotions can move people's hearts with their singing
It's unfortunate, but there is no way around this.
There are songs that children simply can't convey properly.


I just didn't bother to.
It's not that I couldn't refute his point.
You understand, right, Shuhei...?
Granados is 23.
Theiss is 25...
Fang is 21.
I wonder what Kai's thinking as he's listening to this performance?
We're only 17.

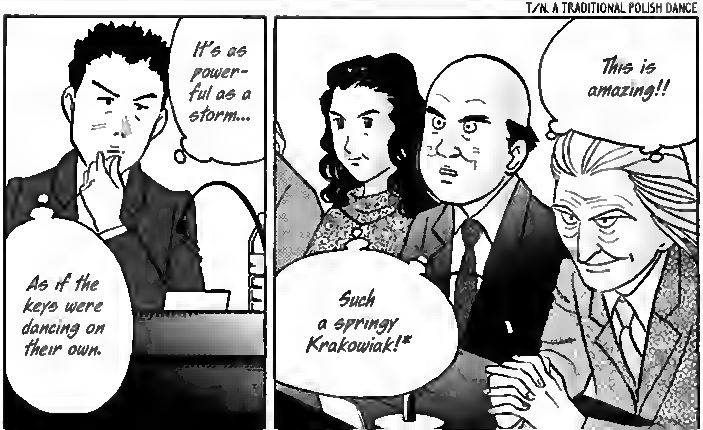
I can't wait to make this hall...
I can't wait to stand on this stage.
Ahh...

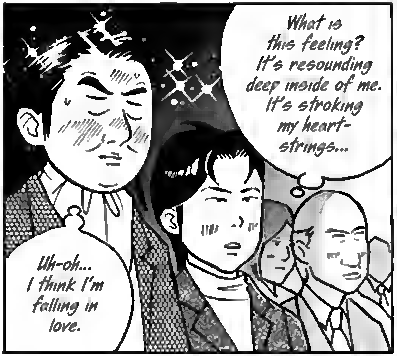

Resound with my No. 1!!
SECOND MOVEMENT
"ROMANCE" LARGHETTO

Show them what you've got, Allegra.
Once this is all over, let's do everything you love!!

You can go crazy and buy a whole load of those nail files you love so much!
Oh yeah!
We'll walk around in Germany eating sausages and potatoes...
Oh! And have some beer too!
Then we'll take it easy in Prague, the city you adore...

T/N. A TRADITIONAL POLISH DANCE




What is this feeling? It's resounding deep inside of me. It's stroking my heart-strings...
Uh-oh... I think I'm falling in love.

It's as firm as... ramen steaming with the hearty scent of pork.
I almost feel like I need some red ginger to go with it.

Her fingers are almost moving TOO much.
I'd like to hear a slightly more delicate touch...

Granado's piano playing is...

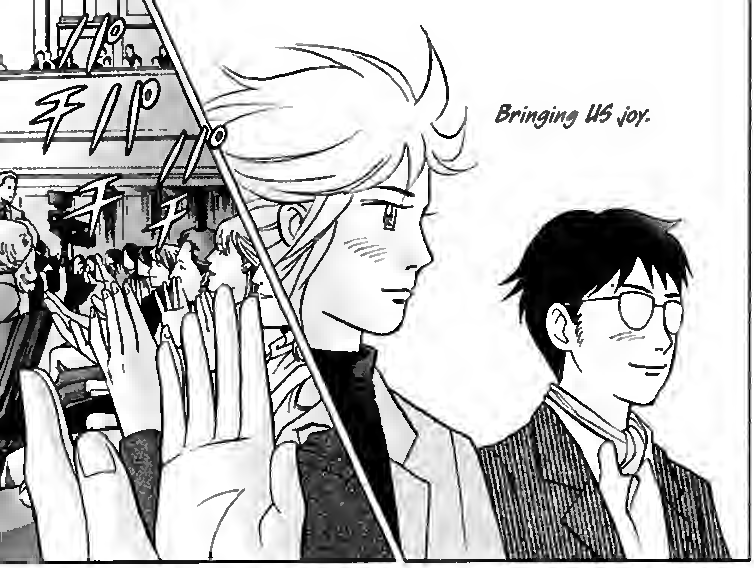
Free...
Majestic...

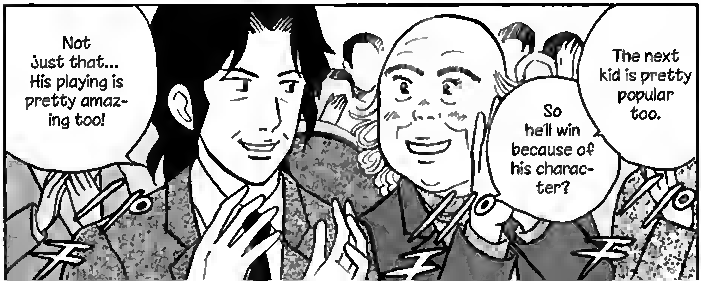
It had me...
The significant wrong note in the last part can be overlooked...
Even...
And wild...

...Captivated, until the very end.

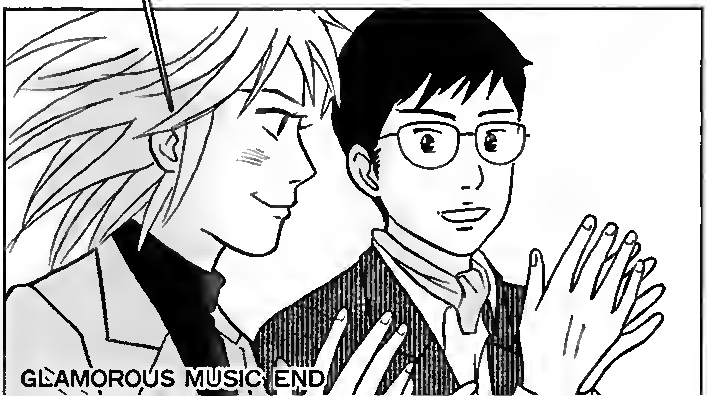
Wow~ Amazing!
Amazing! I want to eat ramen all of the sudden!
It was like drinking Sangria...
While being scolded by Allegro.
Then we'll head to Prague!
I'm definitely going to walk around in Germany eating sausage and potatoes!
Oh! And have some beer too!

I'm really glad... that we made it here.
Hmm?
Kai...
Ah... I'm having a deJà vu...
Yeah.
I'm just so very glad.
Music somehow...
...has the amazing power of bringing people joy...


Bringing US joy.


Not just that... His playing is pretty amazing too!
So he'll win because of his character?
The next kid is pretty popular too.

DAY 3, FINALS
SECOND PERFORMER
DANIEL HUNT
(USA)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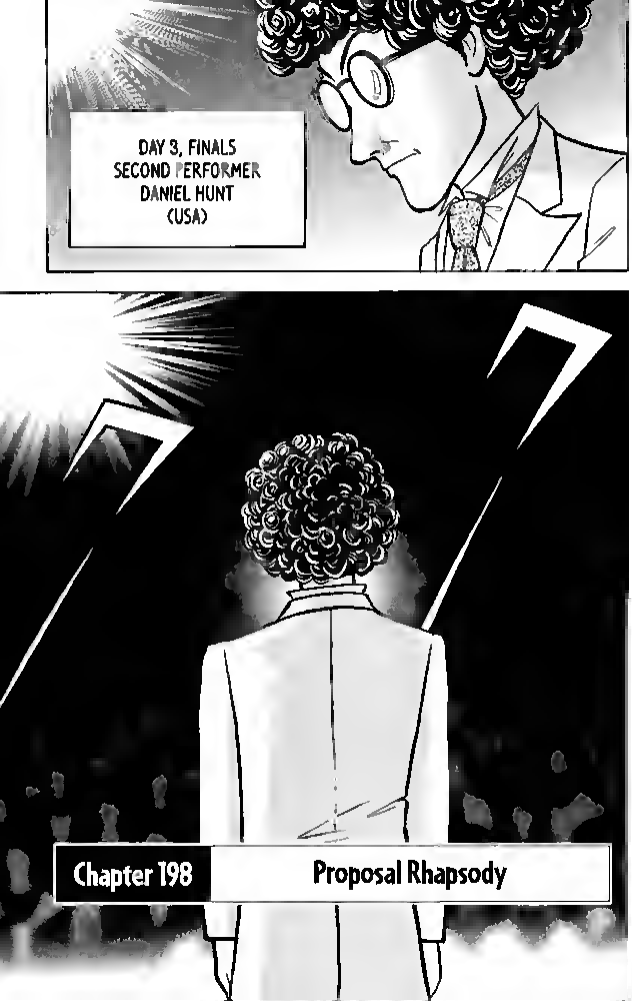


Chapter 198 Proposal Rhapsody

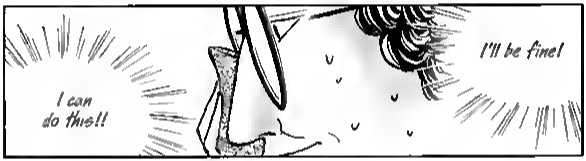
Daniel
I'm fine!

I've got this!
Daniel
I'm gonna be just fine!!

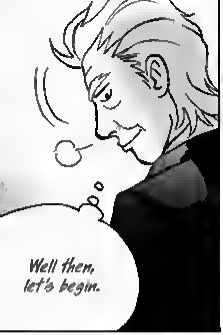
No problem!!

The audience are my lovers!!
The orchestra is my family!
Chopin is...
...My magnificent master!!
YAMA

And God himself has given me His blessing!!
PIANO CONCERTO NO 1
IN E MINOR, OP 11
(PIANO OF CHOICE YAMAHA)

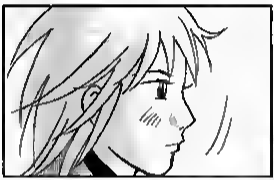

I'll be fine!
I can do this!!

I'm ready!
squeeze
Are you ready?

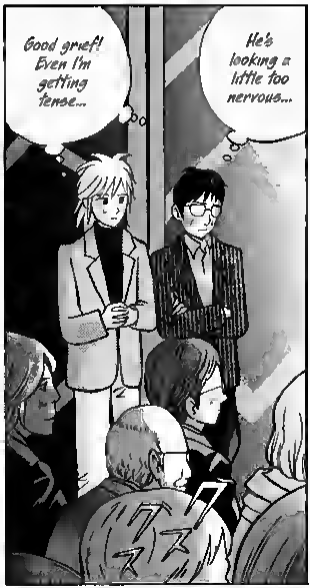

Well then, let's begin.

Ah...

Your neck...
Point Point
You've done it up too tight!



Concerto No. 1 starts with a 4-minute orchestra solo.


Good grief! Even I'm getting tense...
He's looking a little too nervous...

I just love this song...
My heart soars just listening to the orchestra's introduction.
FIRST MOVEMENT
ALLEGRO MAESTOSO

My fingers want to join in so badly they are aching.
Hmm ...?
There's something about the orchestra today...
They want to get playing already.
Even though it's not my turn yet...
Even though this isn't the first day of the finale...
They sound a little stiff, maybe?
The atmosphere in the hall, too...
Huh...?

I see...
It's because of Daniel Hunt!

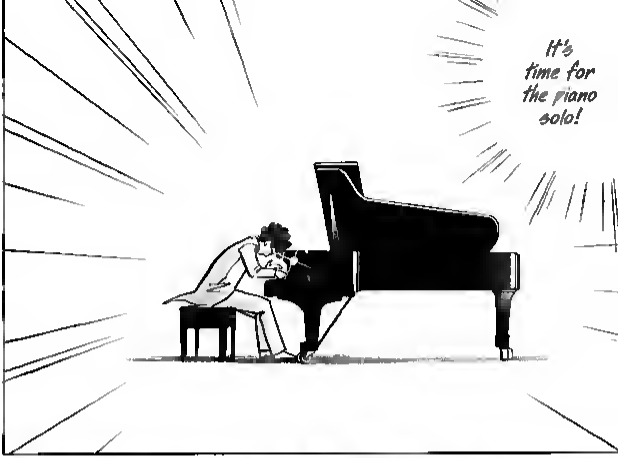
Hunt's tension is...
STIFF
...infecting the whole hall.

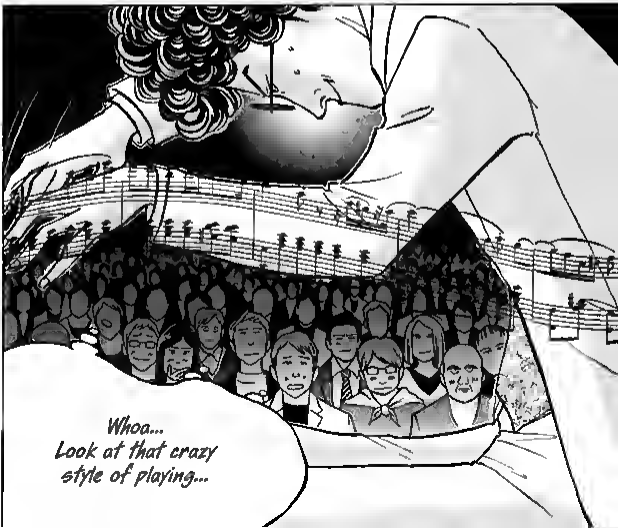
Though he was fine during the second round.
But I heard he fainted again during today's rehearsal
Is... is he alright?
His face is red... and he's breathing so hard
That's right... He's the guy who passed out during the first round.

At last...
And...

Hyaaaaaaa, I'm terrified~

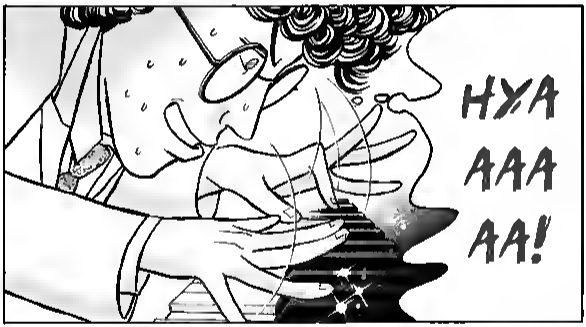
Ohmygod ohmygod..


It's time for the piano solo!


Whoa... Look at that crazy style of playing...

!!!!
His 1st movement is all over the place*...
He's playing the introduction with a rubato!
He looks like he's made of rubber or something...
Ehhh, his style is just too weird~

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: OR RATHER, IT'S MEANDERING



...I'm praying with all my heart, but Hunt is still as tense as ever!
I guess that's only natural.

But Hunt is, after all, the focus of everyone's attention...
We might all be praying for the same thing...

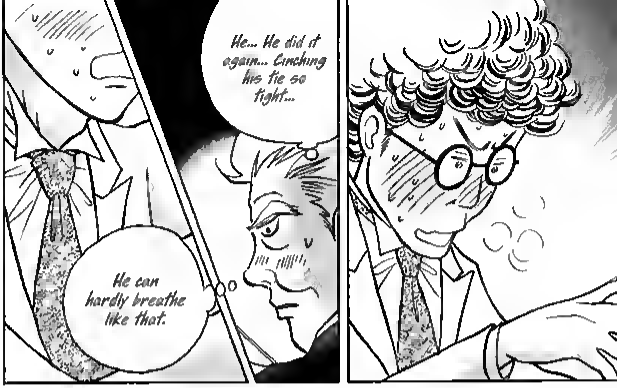
Is being dominated by Hunt's performance.
Right now, the atmosphere of the hall...

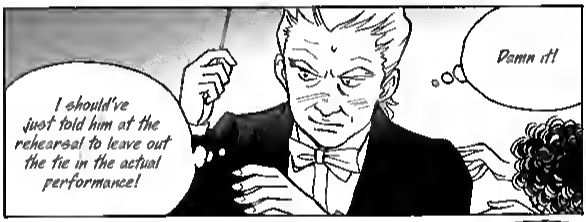
That this could perhaps be considered a demonstration of how communicative his music is...
I suppose you could say...
Ah..
He's nervous, but..
His playing isn't bad.
Actually.. it's pretty good.
SECOND MOVEMENT
"ROMANCE" LARGHETTO
I guess he's stopped worrying about how stiff the orchestra sounds

He'd relax sooner or later
I've never even heard of anyone staying this tense for 40 minutes...
YAMAHA
No no no come on that movement was completely unnecessary
But... this bizarre playing has nothing to do with his tension...
This is just his own personal style...
With his deft control of the timbre, he's able to express subtle shifts in emotion
Hmm... it's an interesting interpretation.
It sounds erratic at first glance, but...

And at times, a Renoir oil...
At times, he's like a Seurat pointillism painting...

Good.
Wha...?!
Yes!
He's finally loosen up.


He... He did it again... Cinching his tie so tight...
He can hardly breathe like that.


Damn it!
I should've just told him at the rehearsal to leave out the tie in the actual performance!

Hunt has the bad habit of tightening his tie when he gets nervous...
You did it again.

Sarah helped me pick out the tuxedo I'm going to wear for the performance!
Ah... Sarah... She's my beautiful girlfriend, y'know. I...
Oh come on... I'll be fine at the real thing
I can hardly wear a tuxedo without a tie...
Oh, I know! This is my last chance!
But... this is the real deal, after all...
I'll definitely show you some results this time!!
And then, and then...
I'll finally propose to Sarah!!
And then the offers will come rolling in...
And of course I'll get myself a contract...
Maybe I'll get Yamaha as my sponsor...

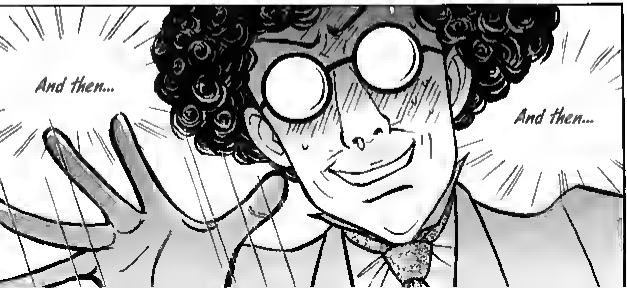
Everyone!
Please lend me
your strength so
I can achieve my
dream!!

I...
THIRD MOVEMENT
"RONDO" VIVACE

I will do
this!!
I'll pour my
life into this
performance.

I'll get a contract...
I'm going to win this thing...
The offers are going to pour in...

I'll get a sponsor...


And then...
And then...

Then I'm gonna propose!!

Sarah!!
Marry me!!

Ehhh?! He passed out again?!
Daniel!
Yeah, my hands are dripping...
And I don't think my armpits have ever been this sweaty.
Ehhh?? I'm not a big fan of this guy's Chopin.
No, wait. He just tripped when he tried to hug the conductor. Jeez.
30-MINUTE RECESS
My goodness! That certainly was an eccentric performance!

He's the sort of pianist that would be well loved by fans.
No argument here.
For him to be able to play like that even when he was that tense..
Daniel Hunt... Just how much potential does that boy have...
Really? That's incredible.
This is Hunt's third time at the competition!
I think people who aren't a fan would dislike him with the same intensity.
Because he's so unique!
No wonder he has such a large following.
I see!
...And this is his third try!
In his second attempt, he made it to the second round, only to trip on his way to the stage, break his nose, and drop out...
During the first contest, he passed out during the first round and dropped out...
Hmm?

Well, if it isn't...
Ah...
Hey! Amamiya-kun, over here, over here!
What excellent timing, come on over!
Ugh.
Ah...
Your little Junior's here too!
Hi
Ba-dump Ba-dump
Ba-dump Ba-dump
Proposal Rhapsody END

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Chapter 199

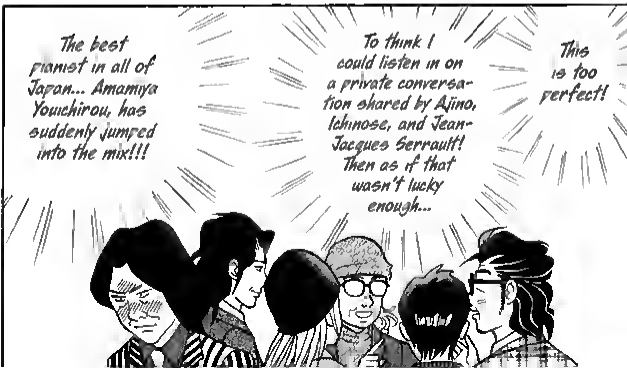
Japanese Conference in Warsaw

Ajino Sousuke!!
A...
Being at the same table as him...
Who'd have thought I'd end up...
I... I don't think Father has ever had an actual conversation with Ajino-sensei before.
Huh?
Introductions aren't necessary... You know each other, right?!

Indeed!
But... this would be the first time we've spoken...
Of course, I've known of him for quite some time...
It's true...
I believe we have greeted each other a few times before though...
Ah... Like that time at Chopin's memorial service...
He was already a star back then.
I could only watch Ajino from afar...
Since back when I was in school...

Well then, this is the perfect chance to get to know each other!
Oh... really?

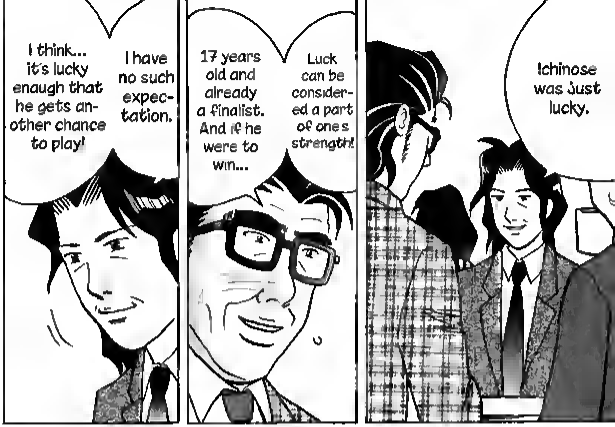
ba-dump
ba-dump
ba-dump
This...


The best pianist in all of Japan... Amamiya Youchirou, has suddenly jumped into the mix!!!
To think I could listen in on a private conversation shared by Ajino, Ichinose, and Jean-Jacques Serrault! Then as if that wasn't lucky enough...
This is too perfect!

I've been attending every year since I was in 5th grade. I've been 6 times now.
The Annual Chirstmas Tour where students are allowed free admission...
With great admiration, Amamiya-san...
Ichinose has always listened to your piano playing...
What?
I'm really looking forward to this year's tour too!!
Oh...
Yes, that...
Ah...
sparkle sparkle
Well, this year...
He hasn't made any preparations for this year's tour yet..
Dad's been... devoting himself to my participation in the competition...

Let's go, Kai!
Okay!
H...Hey Dad, I'll go grab us some coffee, okay?
Huh?
You never said anything to me about that, Kai!
Really? I guess I just never got the chance.
My head was just so full of Shuhei's competition... It didn't even cross my mind.
I haven't made any preparations for the Christmas National Tour this year.
I wasn't even planning on doing it.

His playing really was charming. It really was such a shame.
No, no, he's still got a long way to go.
It really was a shame about Junior...
But dear me, I told the boy himself but...
I can't wait to see how far he'll go.
He's really grown...
I'm looking forward to the final...
No... he's completely dwarfed by Ichinose's talent.
Ajino came in contact with Shuhei when he was still in grade school.
I see...


I think... it's lucky enaugh that he gets another chance to play!
I have no such expectation.
17 years old and already a finalist. And if he were to win...
Luck can be considered a part of one's strength!
Ichinose was just lucky.

What's he doing, pretending to be so nonchalant. It's only making him appear hypocritical!
There's no way he isn't eyeing the gold medal!
After all, if Ichinose wins, he, too, will be hailed as his mentor...
Haha... You're far too modest...

?
Ahaha... Let me guess. You were just thinking that he shouldn't pretend to be so nonchalant!
It might sound as if he were being modest, but he really isn't.

People who've come this far in the competition would normally be aiming for a prize or even the gold medal, but...
But Sousuke definitely has just one goal in mind!
And just what...
Is that goal?!
"To sell Ichinose Kai to the world."
That's Sousuke's only reason for coming here to Warsaw!
To the world...
To sell Ichinose Kai...

He...
He sounds so cool!
Ah...
That's why I'm probably the most excited person here!
Haha...
I made a promise to him when I started teaching him the piano!
The truth is, back when that kid was in grade school...
Yes! It's one more chance for him to show the world what he can do!
Right!
Of course, it was incredibly lucky that he got into the finals...
I told him I'd make it so he could feed himself off what he made from playing the piano...

But since complicated circumstances make it hard for Kai to become active within Japan...
He set his eyes on the entire world... and aimed at being able to feed himself anywhere he goes in the world! That was what he wanted right from the start.
So it was a deal!
Ahh...
Ajino has been planning his moves all for Ichinose's sake right from the beginning!!
He's putting in everything he's got...
This has nothing to do with gaining personal glory...
Just so Ichinose could make a place for himself in the world?!

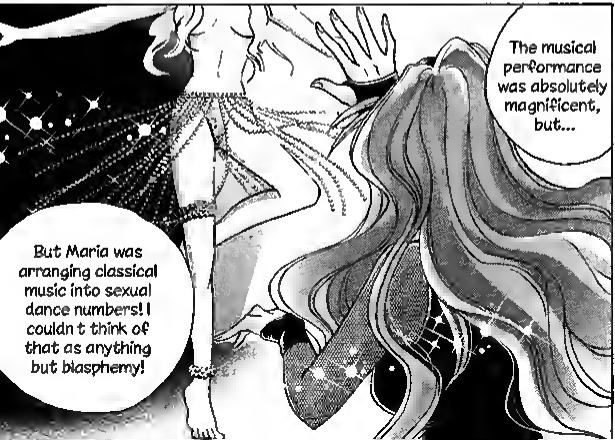
Seriously?
Ahaha
Hahaha, you could say that! We were just talking about how you've been feeding yourself by playing the piano!
Talking about us behind our backs?
Hey, what're you guys talking about?

You know, he's been making a living by playing the piano as a clown since he was a grade schooler!
That's incredible!
To live just off of your piano skills... Kai's amazing!

When you were dressed as a girl!
But what totally blew my mind was...
Aww that was just small change!

Having a job was forbidden, so I just... had to!
No no, that was just... Y'see, the school was real strict and...
Hey...
Don't tell me he's got that sort of fetish?
That's not exactly normal, is it?
He dressed as a g-girl?

I didn't even know where to look...
Honestly, I just about fainted.
Don't ask him!
And did Ajino-sensei come and see you while you were doing this?


But Maria was arranging classical music into sexual dance numbers! I couldn't think of that as anything but blasphemy!
The musical performance was absolutely magnificent, but...

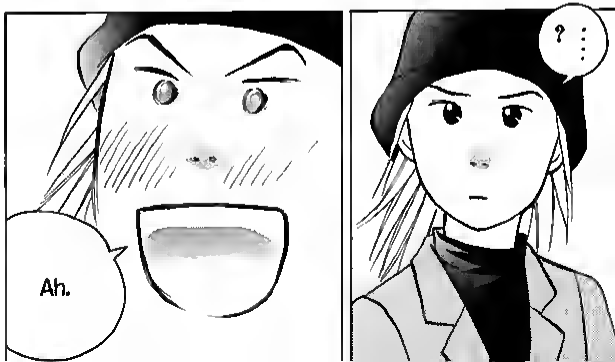
The truth is, I went to see how he was doing just once...
And I didn't know where to look either...
What?
Maria...?
And when I closed my eyes...
Some incredible musical arrangement would fill my ears...
Aino!
And Maria became a total hit there.
But Kai promised he'd never let it interfere with his daily life.
He was underage, so I thought about having him quit...
So I just ended up looking the other way.
She even became something like the poster girl of the bar...
Aww, I'd have liked to see Kai as Maria.
Ahaha...

Eh?
Eh??
Maria...?!

Pining for...
Searching for all this time...
The Maria whom I've been yearning for...
Maria was...
That Maria?!
Ichinose in drag?!

?

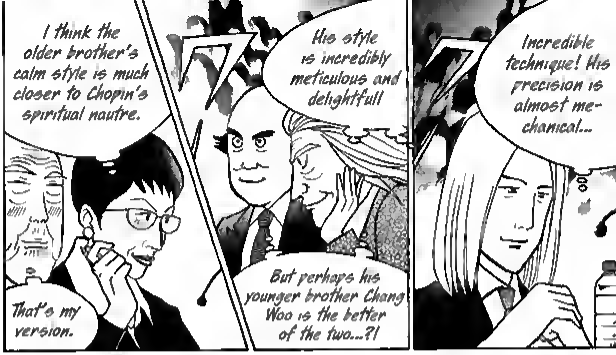
My Maria is...
You... Ichinose??!!


Ah.
?...

Tonight, I'll dedicate my playing entirely to you.
Welcome, and good evening!
?
BOW
AHHHHHHHH!!

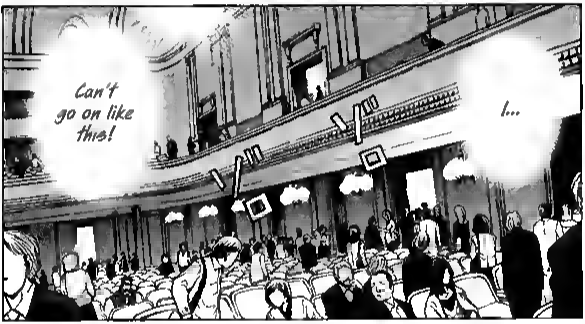
This... This is Saga-sensei! He's a piano teacher... I think...
Yes, my name is Saga.
Ah... yeah.
Is he a friend of yours, Kai?
Here is my card.
Oh, President of Nanwa Music University—
Then you must be the son of Saga Hirotake-sensei.
FLASH
Kai, you know some incredible people!
Nahhh...
I was greatly indebted to your father...

DAY 3, FINALS
THIRD PERFORMER
CHANG SOO AN (SOUTH KOREA)

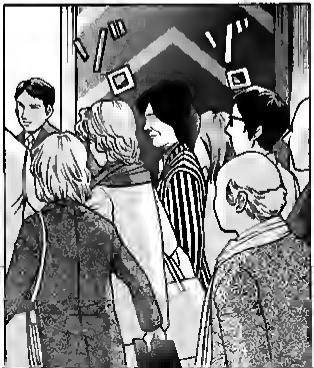

I think the older brother's calm style is much closer to Chopin's spiritual nautre.
His style is incredibly meticulous and delightfull
Incredible technique! His precision is almost mechanical...
That's my version.
But perhaps his younger brother Chang Woo is the better of the two...?!

Didn't even reach my ears!
The older An brother's playing...
Right from the beginning, our goals were different.
I... can't win against Ajino.

While Ajino had his sights set on the world...
Right from the beginning there was no way for us to win, thinking only about beating Ichinose...


Can't go on like this!
I...

I didn't even hear the older An's playing.
My mind was completely... blank.



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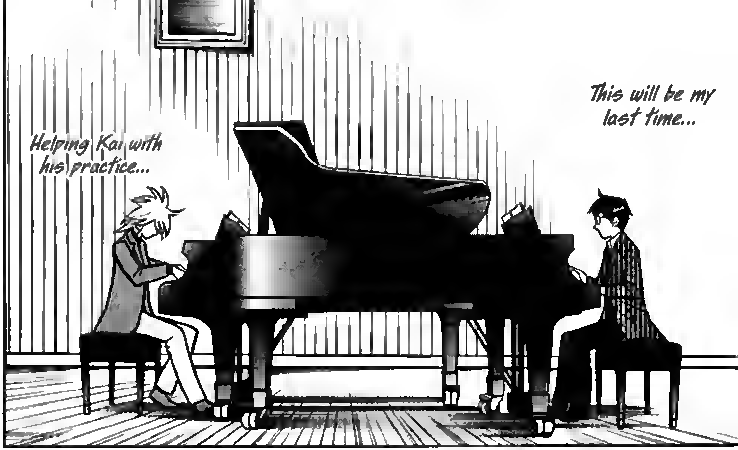
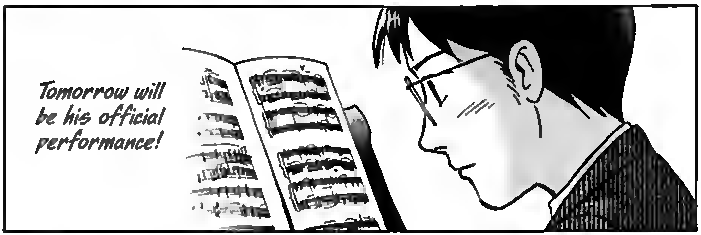
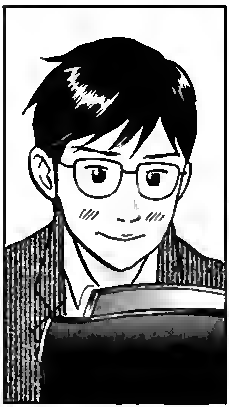
Chapter 200

Midnight Stroll in Warsaw


Helping Kai with his practice...
This will be my last time...

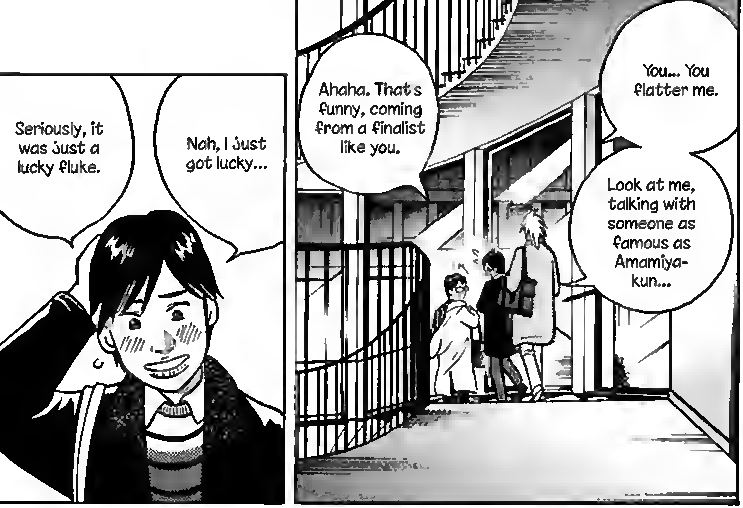

Tomorrow will be his official performance!

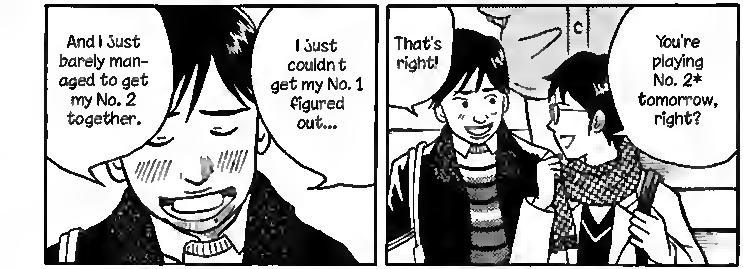


And as far as Kai's performance is concerned...

It's naturally flawless! Perfect enough to set my heart fluttering!
Oh...
It's Ichinose-kun.
Step
Step

Ichinose-kun! You just about to head home?
Ah... Mukai-san!
So tomorrow's the real deal!
Ah...
Good evening.
OMG OMG OMG OMG
Amamiya Shuhei-kun ...
Ni...
Nice to meet you. My name is Mukai Satoru...
Oh, of course.
I recognize you from your profile.
Eeeeek


You... You flatter me.
Look at me, talking with someone as famous as Amamiya-kun...
Ahaha. That's funny, coming from a finalist like you.
Nah, I just got lucky...
Seriously, it was just a lucky fluke.


You're playing No. 2* tomorrow, right?
That's right!
I just couldn't get my No. 1 figured out...
And I just barely managed to get my No. 2 together.

*REFERRING TO CHOPIN'S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 AS OPPOSED TO NO. 1

Aha... so that's why..
It's perfectly understandable..
Then it turns out Wei Pang will be playing No. 2 as well...
I'm finished...
I feel you

It'd be great if Wei Pang doesn't show up tomorrow...
Ahaha, oh come on...
Man, I can relate to that on a spiritual level...
Mukai-san!
And to top it all off, I'm the very last performer.
Talk about pressure...
Ah, sorry sorry. It'll be fine!
I've come this far, so there's no point comparing myself to others.
Tomorrow I'll just have to enjoy playing my own music!
UNIWERSYTET MUZYCZNY FRYDER

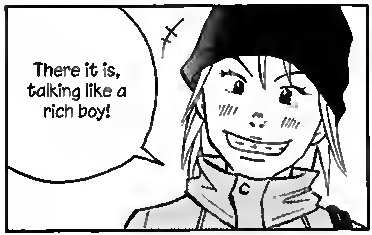
I feel a little better now that I've gotten my gripes out.
Well then, I'm off!
Thanks, Amamiya-kun! I'm glad I got to talk to you!
Same here!
Man, that was lucky ♪
I got to talk to Amamiya-kun!!
I wonder... if Pang will show up tomorrow...
It'd be terrible if he didn't.

We have no reason to fear even if Wei Pang does show up..
Yeah...
It'd suck if I didn't get to listen to Wei Pang play.
True, I want to hear Pang's No. 2 too.
He won't win so easily against Kai's No. 1.
No matter how good Pang's No. 2 is...
Lech... Szymanowski...
Mukai-san, from just now...
Our boy Kai...
Tomorrow's performers will be...

I suppose it's natural to assume that, since no one can really tell just how much impact the home field advantage has...
Dad made a bold prediction, saying that Lech had all but won the competition...
Lech...
After that, it's just a matter of whether Wei Pang comes or not...
All right then, Amamiya. I'll be going this way.
Thanks a bunch for practicing with me!
Huh?

Don't worry! I'll just flag a taxi when I leave!

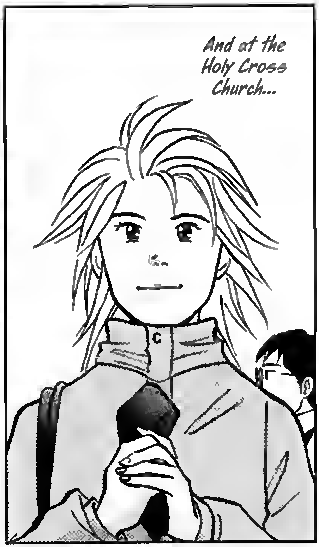
Can't have anything happen to you before the big day...
Oh come on, I'll walk you to your place! Let's go together!
Uhh... But...


There it is, talking like a rich boy!

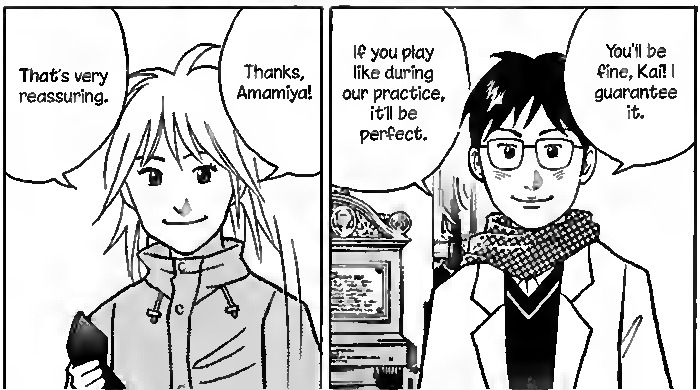
With Amamiya...
A midnight stroll in Warsaw ...

We took pictures like tourists in front of the statue of Copernicus...

I stood before the place where Chopin's heart lies enshrined...
GDZIE SKARB TWÓJ, TAM I SERCE TWOJE
S.W. MATEUSZ VI 21
FRYDERYKOWI
CHOPINOWI
RODACY
UR 22 LUTEGO 1810 R.
W ŻELAZOWEJ WOLI
ZM 17 PAŹDZIERNIKA 1849 R

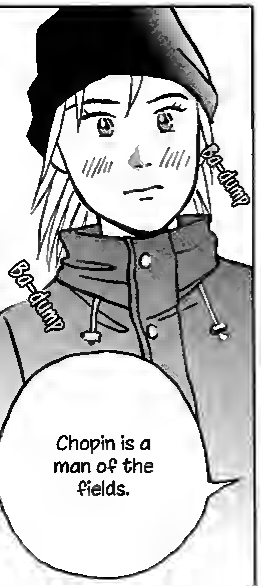

And at the Holy Cross Church...

CHOPINOWI
And asked for his blessing to play his Piano Concerto No. 1 for him at the competition tomorrow...
I swore to him... That I'll give this performance with everything that I am.


That's very reassuring.
Thanks, Amamiya!
If you play like during our practice, it'll be perfect.
You'll be fine, Kai! I guarantee it.

But there's no point in playing the way I did during practice.
Because the stage is alive...
There's the atmosphere in the hall.
And since it's a concerto, there's the orchestra...
You mean there will be some kind of chemical reaction as you perform live?
Yep.
That's the issue.
Come to think of it, this is the second time we're having this conversation.

This city is beautiful isn't it?
Amamiya...


Bo-dum
Bo-dum
Chopin is a man of the fields.

Hey, did you know?
"Poland" is derived from the word "pole", which literally means "field" in Polish.

This impression is particularly strong...
Perhaps because Japan's an island country.
But... somehow Germany didn't give me the same vibes.

Is that unlike Japan, Poland really is a 'flat' country.
What I realized, after having lived here for a year,
No matter where you look, it just stretches off forever.
It really is.
Yeah.

Gazing up at the wide open sky...
On the plains that stretch off into eternity...
Ba-dump
Ba-dump
Raised on these plains.
Chopin was...
Amamiya, that...
Hmm?
What you just said, I think it might be a huge hint.

That's exactly it.
This distinctly Polish sensitivity that's incomprehensible to those in Japan.
I only noticed after you brought it up...
Really? It was useful?!
Yeah.
Was raised on the plains.
Chopin...
We stopped by Naotroj, where I work part-time, and...

What...
What's all this? Shouldn't the place be closed by now?
The place was full of familiar faces...
Welcome back, Kai!!
Huh?
They say it's to thank you for playing them such lovely music up till now.
Everyone chipped in and got you this!
Thank god you came after all...
Kaaaa!
We didn't know if you'd be coming, but we've been waiting here for you, Kai.
Oh? What could it be?
The folks have got something they want to give you, Kai.

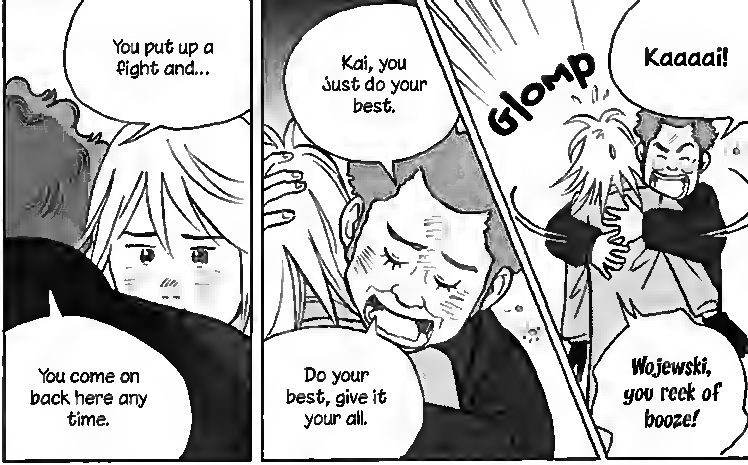
Wow!!
Leather gloves!!
.....
RUSTLE
RUSTLE
These are nowhere near as fancy. They're all broke.
Oh no no no.
These are just like Amamiyas.
See, he loves them!
I've always wanted a pair!!
Thank you so much everyone!!
I will always, always treasure them!

The people of Poland... The people at this shop are so kind.
But I should be the only saying thank you.
Thank you for listening to my playing all this time.

Let them all hear...
Your piano playing!

Show 'em all what you're made of!!
You got it!

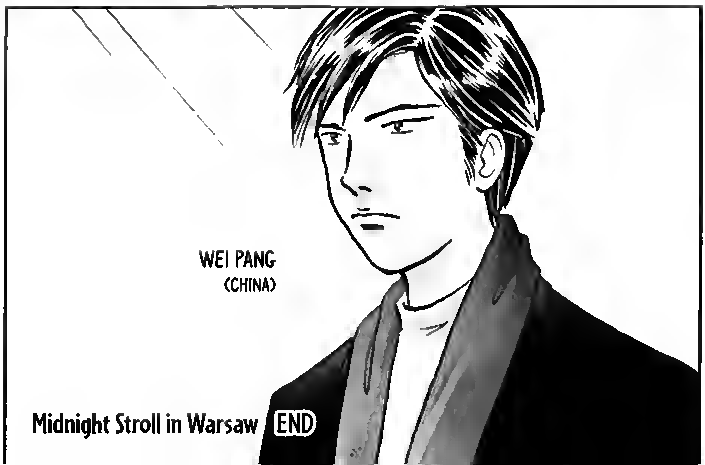
And... I will soon have to bid this place farewell.
Give it your all tomorrow.


You put up a fight and...
You come on back here any time.
Kai, you just do your best.
Do your best, give it your all.
Glomp
Kaaaai!
Wojewski, you reek of booze!

Woi, let the boy go already!
Kaaaai...
When this competition is over...

Good news.
Kai!
Everyone really loves you, huh, Kai!
Yeah.
They're all really kind people.

Yes!
According to Jean, that is...
It seems Wei Pang will be performing tomorrow after all!
All the players are in place.
Nod
With that...
That's great.
SATORU MIKAI
(JAPAN)
LECH SZYMANOWSKI
(POLAND)
KAI ICHINOSE
(JAPAN)


WEI PANG
(CHINA)
Midnight Stroll in Warsaw
END

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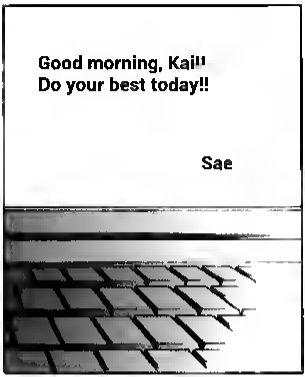
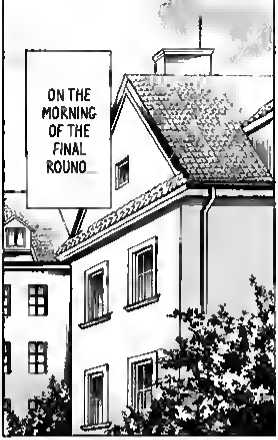
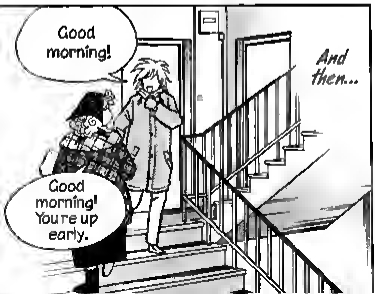
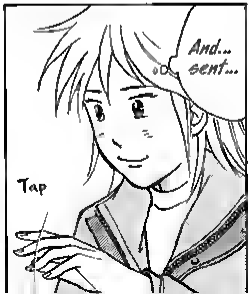
Artwork from "Bungou Stray Dogs"


Good morning, Kai!!
Do your best today!!
Sae


ON THE MORNING OF THE FINAL ROUND...

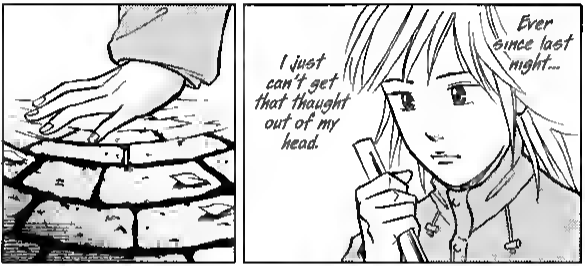
Okay!
I'll show them what I've got!!
Kai
Tap
Tap
Tap
I CHECKED MY MAIL, JUST LIKE ALWAYS.

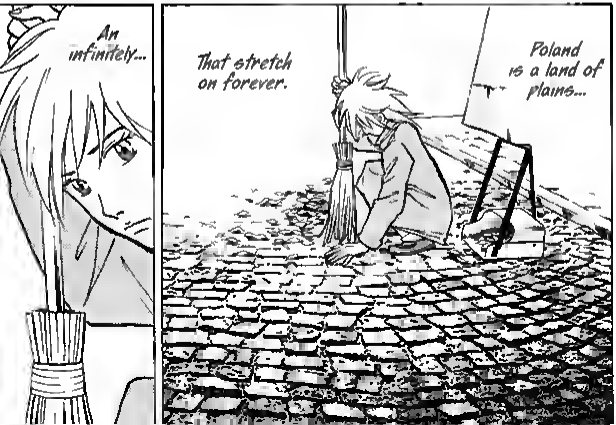

Good morning!
And then...
Good morning! You're up early.

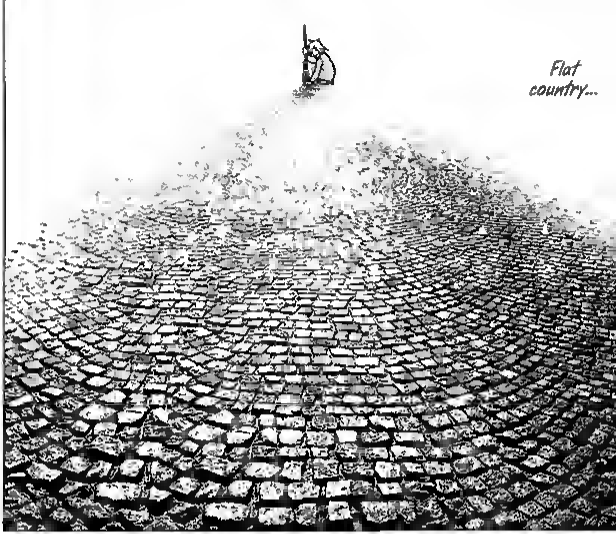

And... sent...
Tap

Chapter 201 Morning in the Forest of Chopin

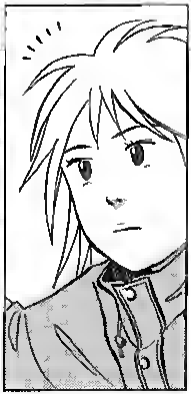
Grew up on the plains.
Chopin...

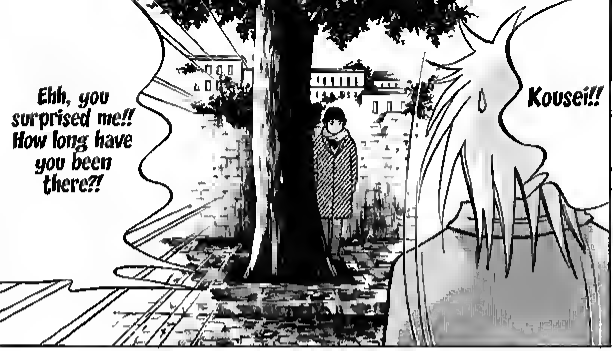

I just can't get that thaught out of my head.
Ever since last night...

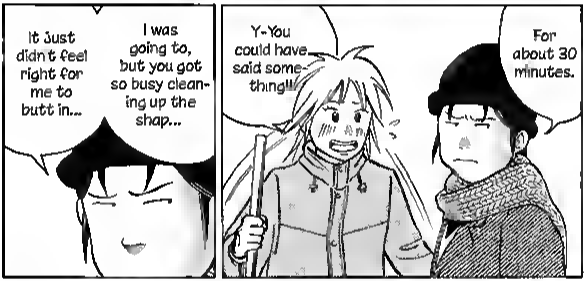

An infinitely...
That stretch on forever.
Poland is a land of plains...

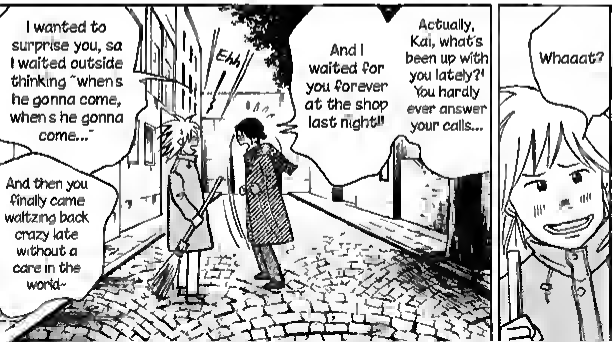

Flat country...

Ko...

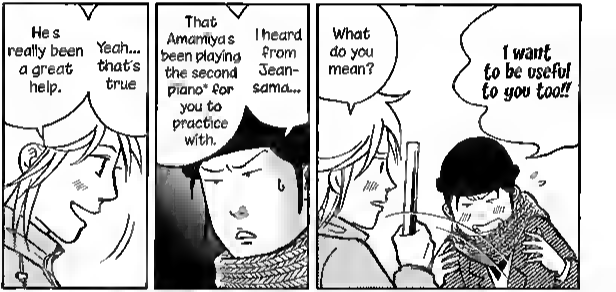



Ehh, you surprised me!! How long have you been there??
Kousei!!


It just didn't feel right for me to butt in...
I was going to, but you got so busy cleaning up the shop...
Y-You could have said something!!!
For about 30 minutes.


I wanted to surprise you, so I waited outside thinking "when's he gonna come, when's he gonna come..."
Ehh
And I waited for you forever at the shop last night!!
Actually, Kai, what's been up with you lately?! You hardly ever answer your calls...
Whaaat?
And then you finally came waltzing back crazy late without a care in the world-

What? It's fine, Kousei. You've never done it before, have you?
Whatever, just leave the cleaning to me.
Whaaat? Why would you be bothered by something like that?
And then you went back all buddy-buddy with Amamiya so I just had to go home wrapped in my own loneliness.
Sniff


He's really been a great help.
Yeah... that's true
That Amamiya's been playing the second piano* for you to practice with.
I heard from Jean-sama...
What do you mean?
I want to be useful to you too!!

*AUTHOR'S NOTE. AS IN A BIND PERSON PLAYING THE ORCHESTRAL PART ON A PIANO

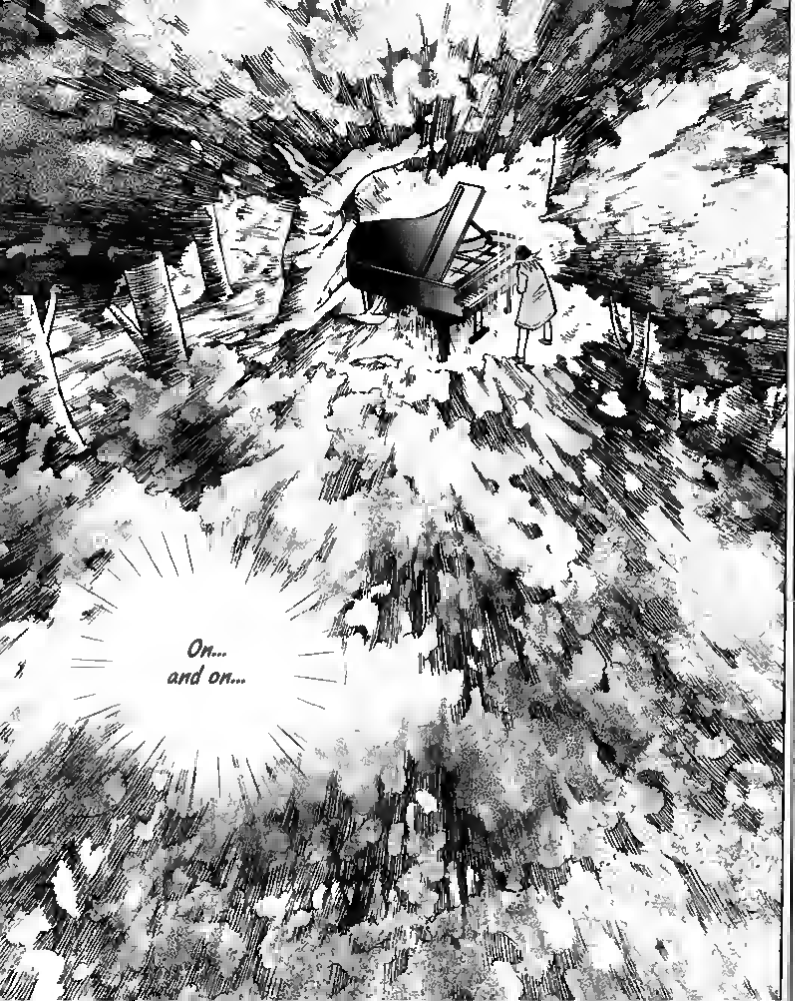
Quiet down. I'm seriously about to hit you.
Just tell me what I can do for you!!
I just want you to rely on me for something. Anything!!
Though I guess I understand why you'd want Amamiya over someone who didn't even get past the preliminaries...
How come you didn't ask me?!

Once cleaning was done...
I headed over to "Chopin's Forest".
Jeez. I got held up by Kousei and wasted so much time

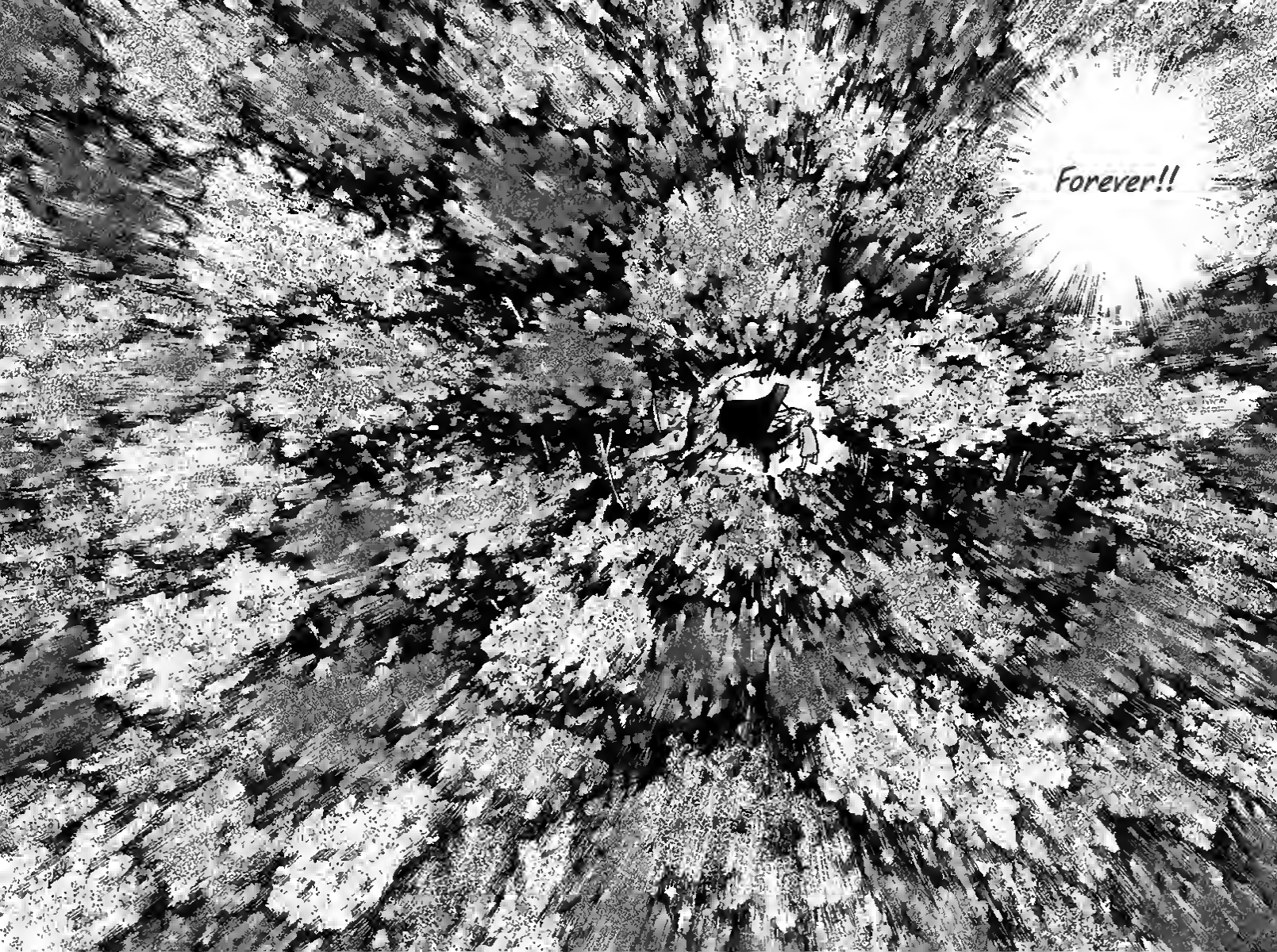
Well, if I have to be at the hall by 10...
That gives me an hour to spend in the forest!!

He was raised... on the big and endless plains.
Chopin...
Whereas we were raised in a country full of mountains and valleys, ups and downs
Kai...
The "Piano Forest" was like it's own little stage, but. how about "Chopin's Forest"?
Like the place that resembles the "Piano Forest" a lot that you took me to the other night!

It's huge, so it should be easier for you to conjure it in your mind despite the difference in the soils of Japan and Poland.
Is as wide...
As this forest...
If the Piano Forest...

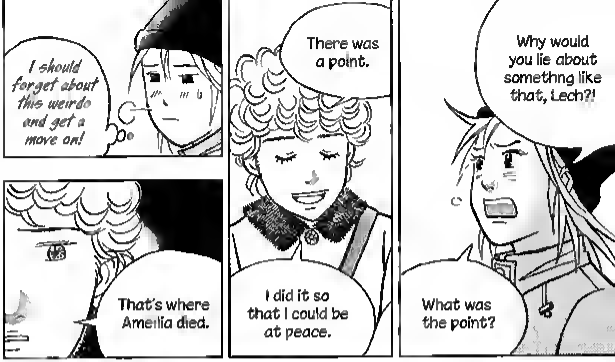

On...
and on...

If it's bigger...
If it stretches on... and on...
If it's forest as far as the eye could see...


Forever!!

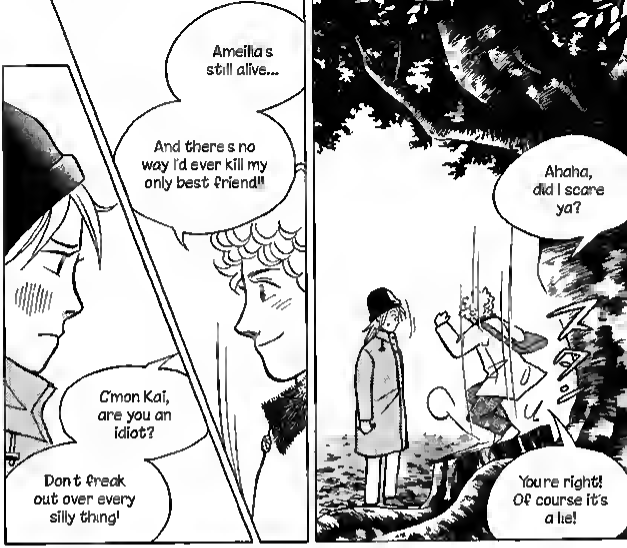
Hi.
You were with Amamiya yesterday... so I didn't call out...
So you're alone today!
It's really as if you're the Master of the Forest, Lech! You keep popping out all over the place.
Looks like you two made up!
I'm glad!
Hahaha...
Well, I love this place!

I called them up this morning... Told em I wasn't feeling well...
They said Wei Pang had already showed up... so I just switched my slot with him.
So my rehearsal starts at 2pm!
Hey, shouldn't you already be at your rehearsal?
You go before me, so yours should be at 10! They told us to arrive an hour early...
Pang... So he's already here.
Alright.
I didn't get better. It was a lie to begin with!
...So, are you feeling better?
If you're feeling well enough to climb a tree, I guess you're okay...


I should forget about this weirdo and get a move on!
There was a point.
Why would you lie about somethng like that, Lech?!
That's where Amelia died.
I did it so that I could be at peace.
What was the point?

What? Where...?

I killed her...
What?
Huh?
There... Right where you're resting your foot...
That...
That's another lie, right?
Come on, that's a pretty horrible lie!!


Ameilia's still alive...
And there's no way I'd ever kill my only best friend!!
C'mon Kai, are you an idiot?
Don't freak out over every silly thing!
Ahaha, did I scare ya?
You're right! Of course it's a lie!

I... don't want to fight with you, Lech...
I'd better get going...
Let's both just relax and enjoy playing the piano today!

Pang is nothing.
Did you read that article? "The Truth About Wei Pang?"
If you don't perform, then victory will be mine!
Well, I'd definitely relax if you forfeit your turn!
He's just a filthy orphan that got picked up off the street by some vile old man!
And, above all...
How...
How dare you...
He actually based his art off some talentless hack pianist no ones ever heard of...
He's hopeless.

Ah...
Grab
Sorry but Kai doesn't have much time.
We'll have to excuse ourselves.
Sorry, Le... Mr. Szymanowski.
Amamiya!!
And here I was wandering what you were doing...

Anyway, come on, we have to hurry!
.....
....!
Thanks, Amamiya.
You saved me.
But how come you're here?
You said you had to arrive at the venue an hour before your rehearsal, so I was waiting for you, but you didn't show up...
Then I figured you might be here... so I flagged a taxi and rushed over.

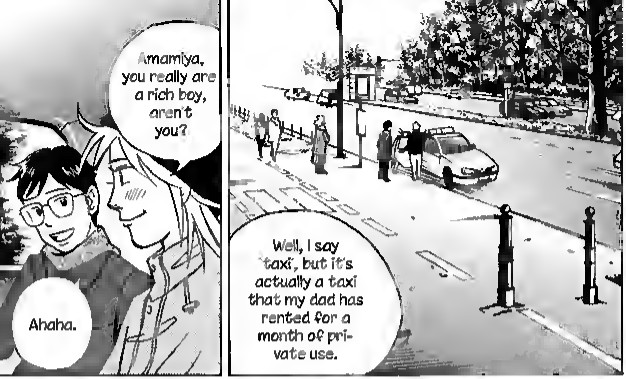
How much did you hear?
But to think Lech was that kind of guy...
I heard him telling you to "forfeit your turn." I just stood rooted to the spot.

It's a good thing you told me about this place yesterday!

That was probably just another of his lies.

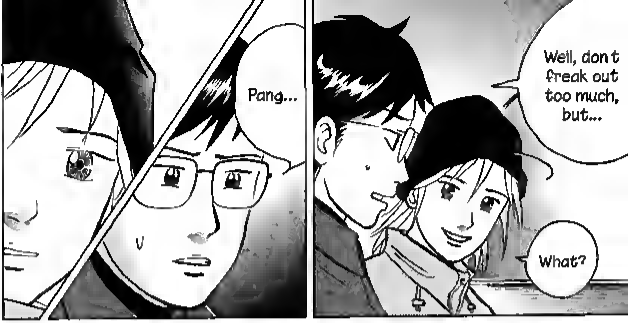
What a jerk.

Anyway, let's hurry!
Colt, the conductor, is real strict about time!
I've got a taxi waiting.

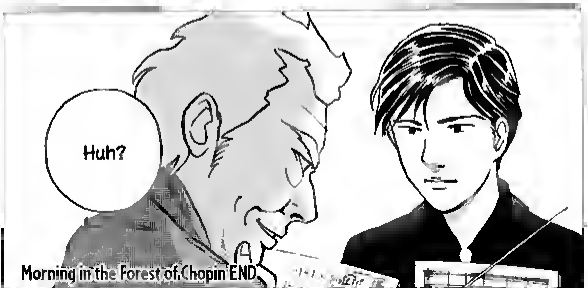

Amamiya, you really are a rich boy, aren't you?
Ahaha.
Well, I say taxi, but it's actually a taxi that my dad has rented for a month of private use.

I used to get tired of everyone calling me rich boy, rich boy all the time...
But then I figured, if people are gonna call me that anyway, I might as well use my rich boy perks to their fullest!
And then my life got so much easier!

I heard from Lech that they've swapped time slots.
Yep, I know!
Anyway, Pang went in for his rehearsal at 10!
You bet!
Ahaha. Thank god you're a rich boy!


Pang...
Well, don't freak out too much, but...
What?

He switched his piece from No. 2 to No. 1.


Huh?
Morning in the Forest of Chopin END

Artwork from "Gu...rding".

Chapter 202 The Reason He Changed His Piece

Wei Pang changed his piece from No. 2 to No. 1.
Yeah.
He changed his piece?

I heard him play in Paris that day...!!
The No.1...

What are you going to do, Kai?!
Oh..
Who could top that No 1!!
...I don't think there's anyone...
I've been dying to hear it.
Ever since Amamiya told me Pang's No. 1 was amazing..
Oh man, this is great!! I get to hear the No 1!
Are...
Are you alright, Kai?
Oh my god...
I seriously can't wait!!

Huh?
Ah!
Flip
Th-that's right!! Now's not the time to be getting all excited...
Yeah, I think I'll be alright!
If the traffic isn't bad, we should arrive with 10 minutes to spare.
Ah... yeah...
That's... not what I meant..
But, more importantly..
Hm?
That's a new record..
Ajino called me five times in the last 30 minutes.

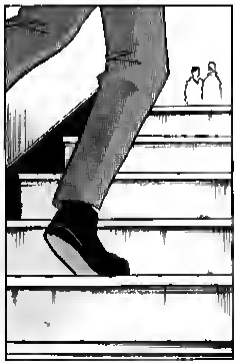
Aaino-sensei once told me...
You'd only pick up the phone once out of ten times he calls.

Yeah, I figure he's a bit annoyed.

Wei Pang switched his piece from No. 2 to No. 1.

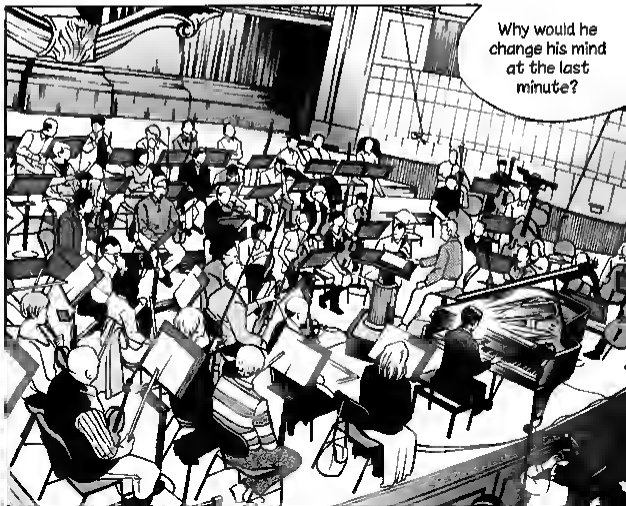
That's also why I decided to just come and find you myself.
Amami-yei-kun.

Hey, did you hear?!
Wei Pang changed his piece to No. 1!!



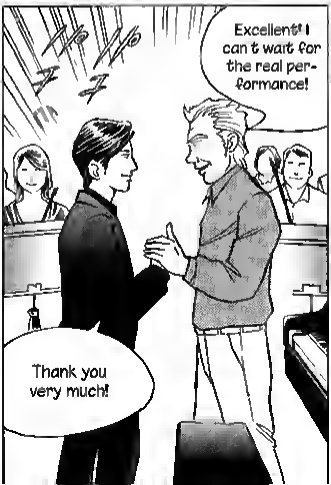
PRESS ROOM
That was a surprise!
Yeah, we heard, we heard!

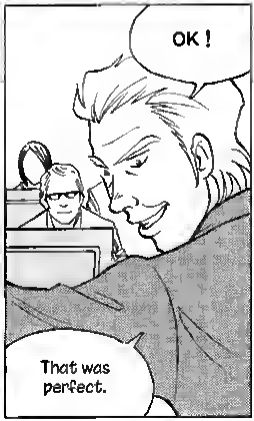
Yeah, but I wonder why..
Everyone's getting hyped, saying...
We get to relive the legendary performance in Paris!

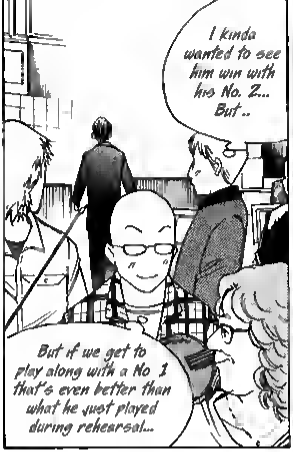

Why would he change his mind at the last minute?

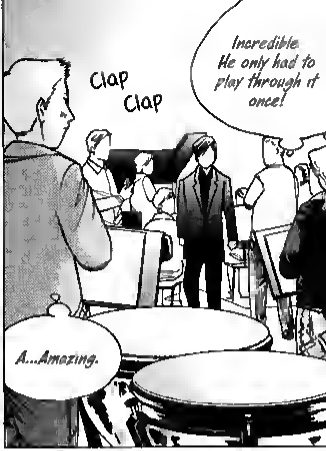
Hurry up Kai.
The reason is quite simple!
Why did Pang change his piece to No. 1?
It's to ensure his own 'victory'!
Ah...
Maybe he met with his father...
This means he's seriously in this to win!!
That said... I never expected him to change his piece.

That's definitely a possibility...
He might have promised his dying father that he'd win!
Ahh... That sounds plausible!
But if that's true, then today's Wei Fang is definitely going to be...
Completely invincible!!


Excellent! I can't wait for the real performance!
Thank you very much!


OK !
That was perfect.


I kinda wanted to see him win with his No. 2... But..
But if we get to play along with a No. 1 that's even better than what he just played during rehearsal...


Clap
Clap
Incredible. He only had to play through it once!
A...Amazing.

I changed my piece...

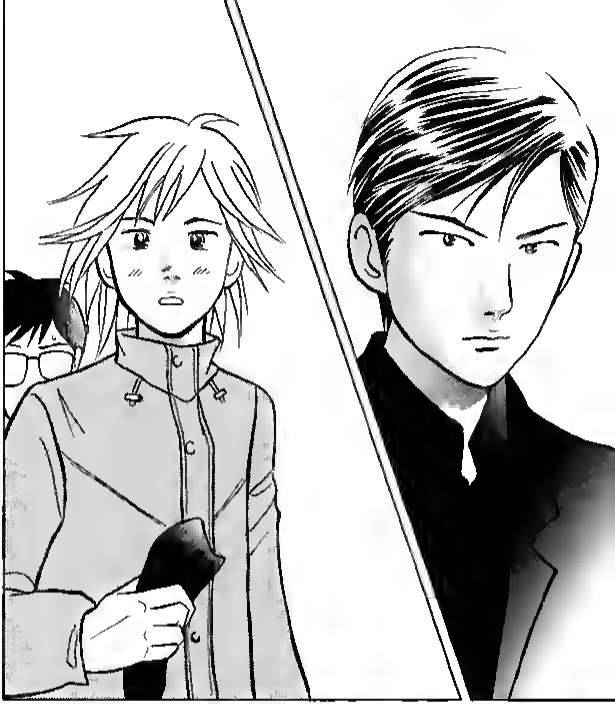
Alright, 15-minute break.
Woohoo!

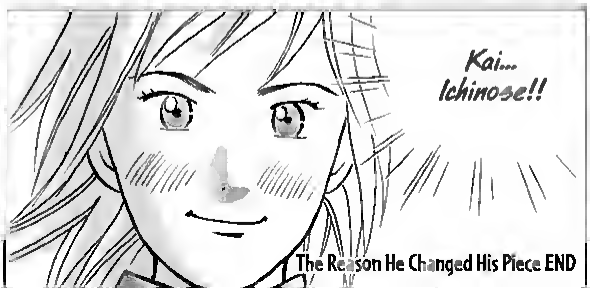
Because the date of my performance had changed.

If I'll be performing on the last day... The same day as Ichinose ..
No matter what, I just want to take him on with the same song he's playing

I have to face Ajino Sousuke's only disciple, Ichino-

No matter what..





The Reason He Changed His Piece END

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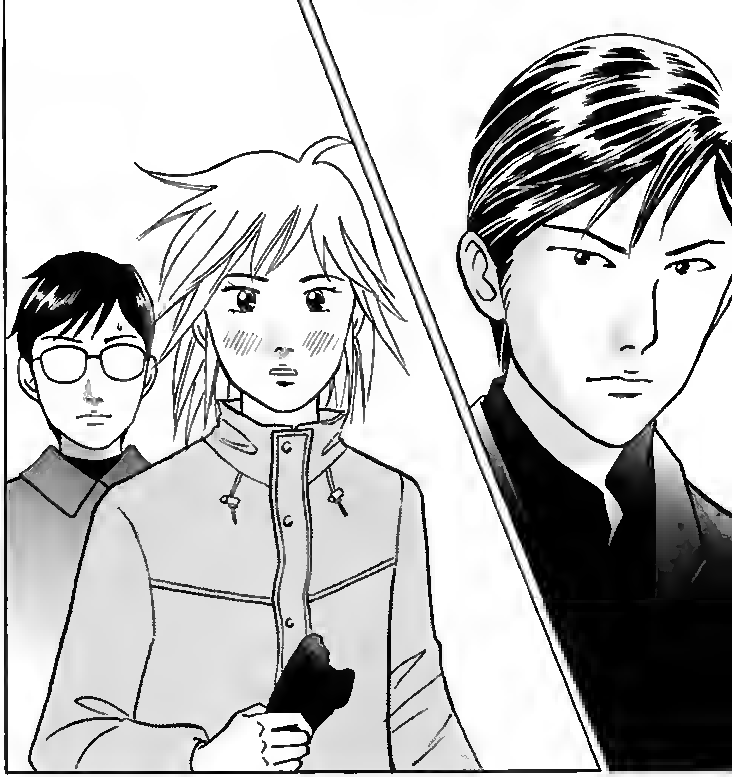
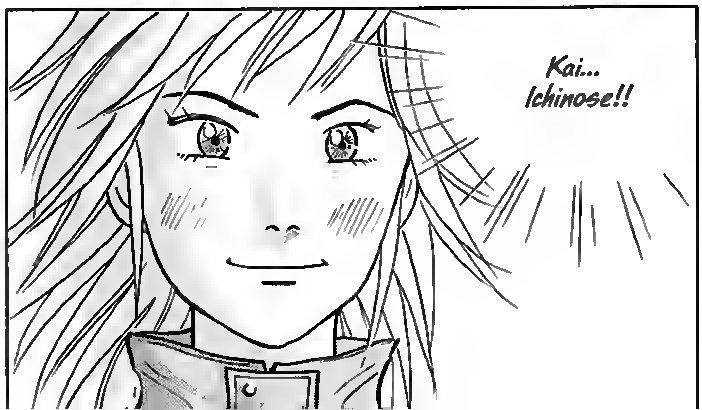
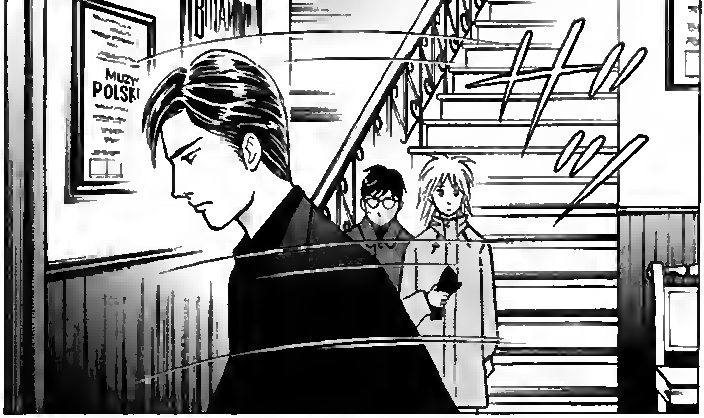
Chapter 203

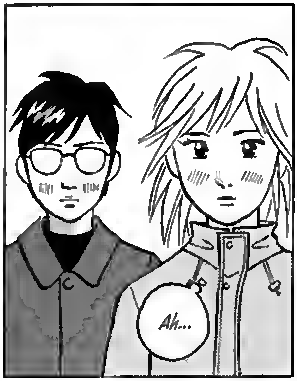
"What?"

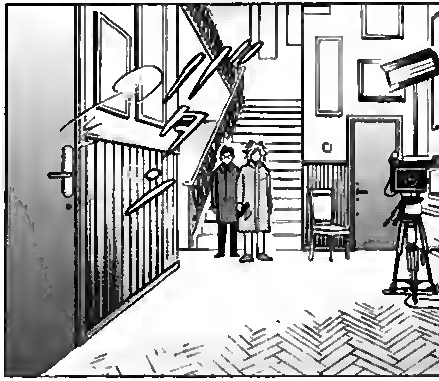


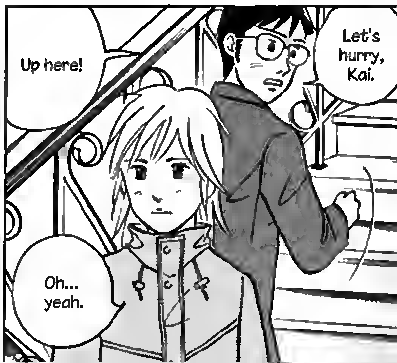

Kai...
Ichinose!!

Having a showdown with him was the whole reason I...
?
Wei Pang...
Changed his piece from No. 2 to No. 1 today!!

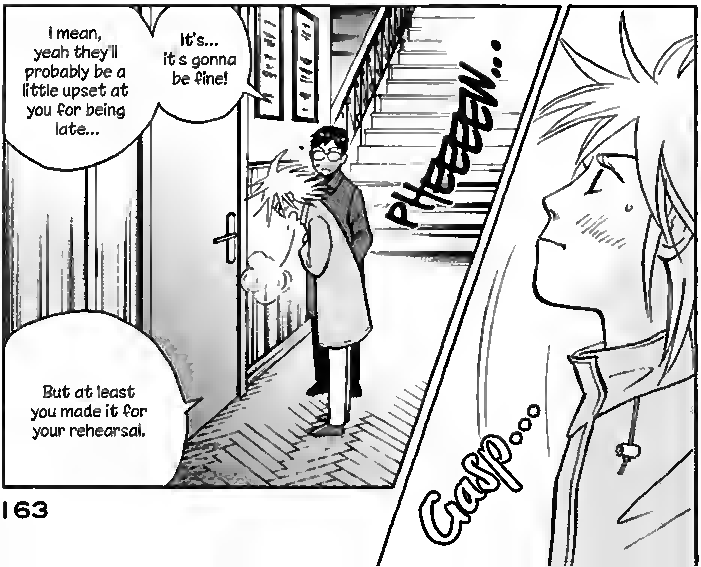

Muzyk
POLSKI


Ah...

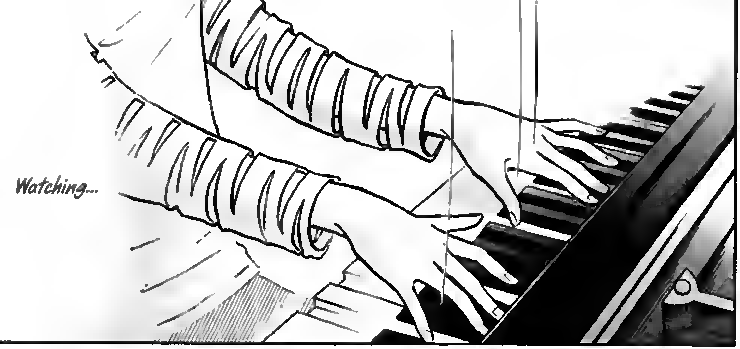


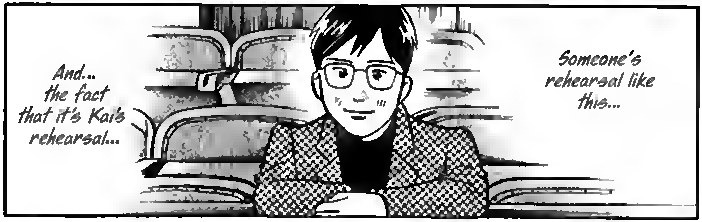

Up here!
Let's hurry, Kai.
Oh... yeah.

That I changed my set piece to No. 1, the same as his!!
Having a showdown with Ichinose, fair and square, was the sole reason...


I mean, yeah they'll probably be a little upset at you for being late...
It's... it's gonna be fine!
But at least you made it for your rehearsal.
Phwaaa...
Gasp...

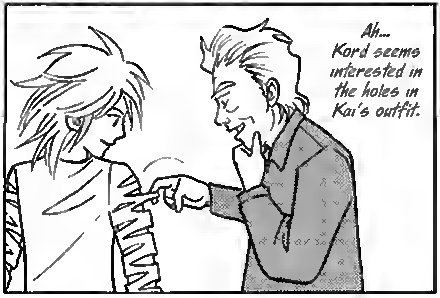
Here I am, just in time!
Here...
You're late!


Watching...


And... the fact that it's Kai's rehearsal...
Someone's rehearsal like this...

What an indescribable feeling.
Ah, he ended up wearing that holey old thing after all...

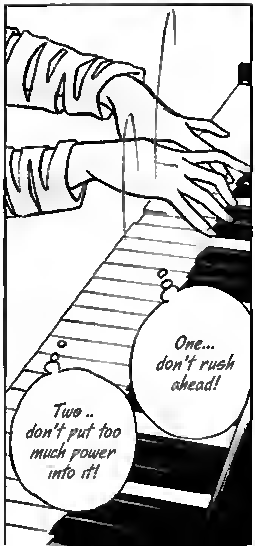
*QC/N: WE HAVE CHANGED THE NAME OF THE DIRECTOR TO ANTONI KORD AS IT TURNS OUT TO BE A SHOUT-OUT TO KAZIMIERZ KORD AND ANTONI WIT, BOTH PAST MUSICAL DIRECTORS OF THE ACTUAL WARSAW PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA.



Just how massive a chemical reaction will you have to cook up?

This is the most basic of basics when playing with an orchestra... That's what Ajino taught me.

To grasp the volume and tempo of the orchestra!
And three is the main point of this rehearsal...


One... don't rush ahead!
Two .. don't put too much power into it!

My first time with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra...
It's different from the sound of M... A unique timbre...

Is it because of the hall?
Or is it because everyone here is brought up on the plains...?

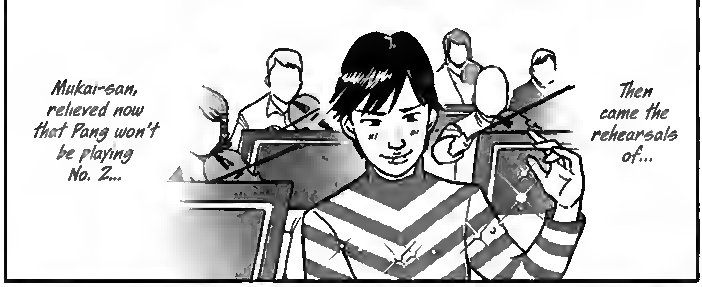
Hmm. How can I describe this...

Oh...? This child's piano playing...

This music somehow...
Huh...?

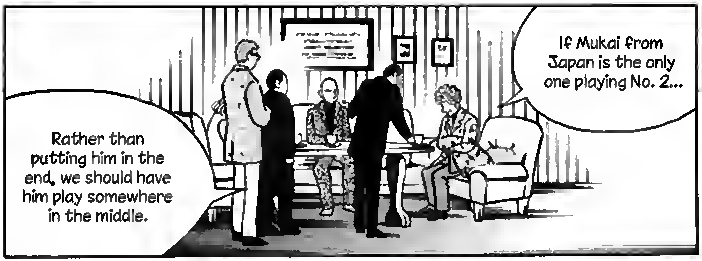
That's it.
It feels good!!

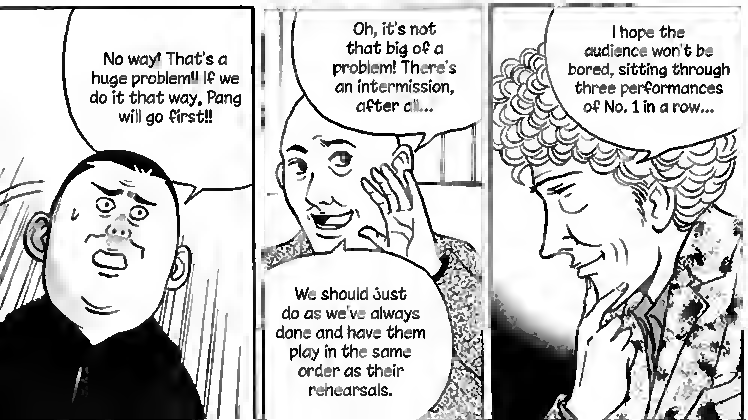
The harmony between Kai and the orchestra...
...Is this what he meant by "chemical reaction"?
It's completely different from our practice sessions!
Ah.. More cameramen are showing up.
Even though it's just a rehearsal...


Mukai-san, relieved now that Pang won't be playing No. 2...
Then came the rehearsals of...

And the problem child... Lech Szymanowski.
Both of which went smoothly...

A new issue has arisen for the organizers.
However, as Fang switched his piece from No. 2 to No. 1...
Knock Knock


If Mukai from Japan is the only one playing No. 2...
Rather than putting him in the end, we should have him play somewhere in the middle.

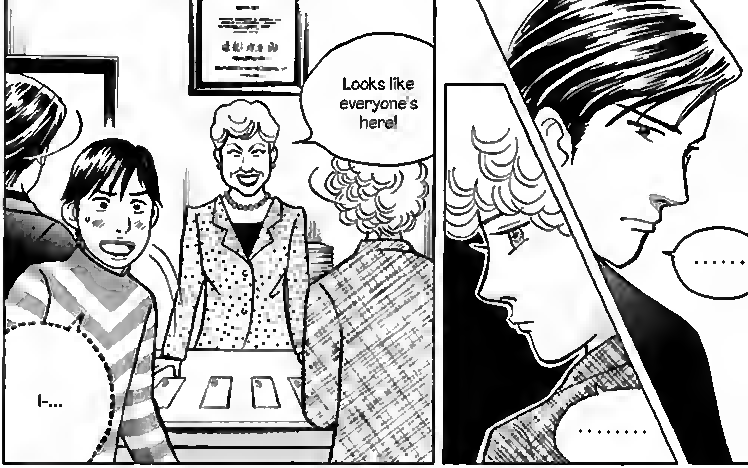

No way! That's a huge problem!! If we do it that way, Pang will go first!!
Oh, it's not that big of a problem! There's an intermission, after all...
We should just do as we've always done and have them play in the same order as their rehearsals.
I hope the audience won't be bored, sitting through three performances of No. 1 in a row...

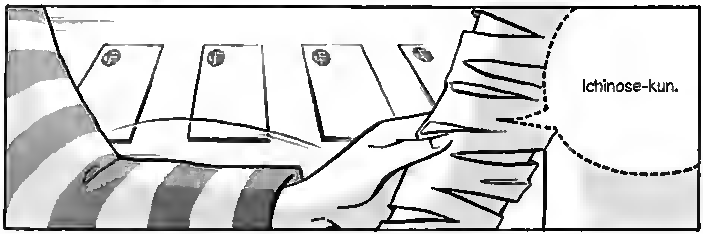
Oh, shut it! With Pang coming this far, we have to let him play last so he can leave the strongest impression possible!
If we go with the original order, Lech Szymanowki of your country should go first!
But... he himself said he's fine with anything!
Pang just came back to Warsaw this morning, so obviously he should go last!
We've got to have Poland's new rising star play last and bring the house down!!
That's no good either! Lech changed his place in line because he wasn't feeling well!!
I won't budge a single inch. The face of my country is on the line!
Our country is the number one sponsor this year! How much money do you think we've put into this!!
Is this four-eyes grumbling despite knowing that?!

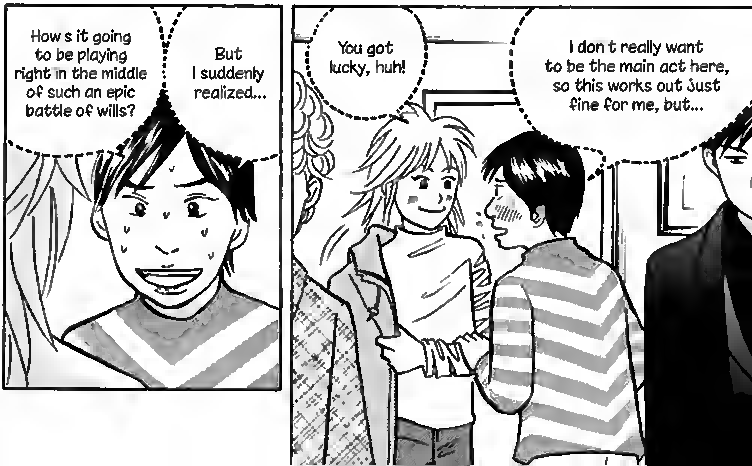
Yammer
Yammer
Yammer
Yammer
.....
.....
In the end, even the Chairman of the Judging Panel got involved...
Well then...
Why not have the performers themselves draw lots?
What?!!!
That would be the fairest way.

Yes.
We need to be at the office in 30 minutes!
What? By drawing...?!
Right now?
Poland really is...
Haha...
Will we make it?
Well... I doubt they'd let us eat in there.
A country good at adapting to any situation.
What?
What?

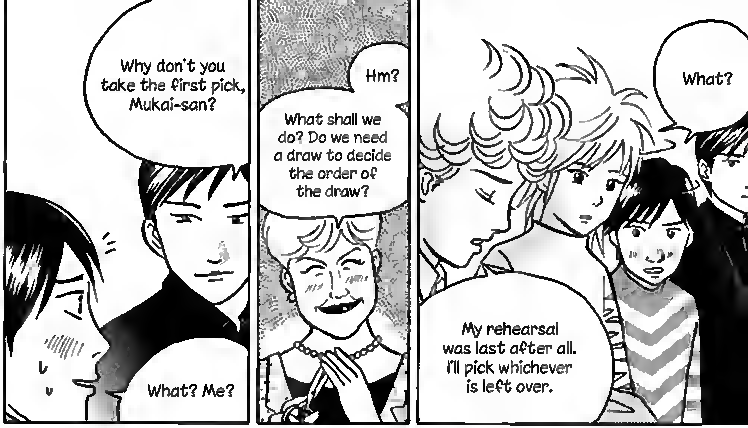
Hello!!
Sorry!

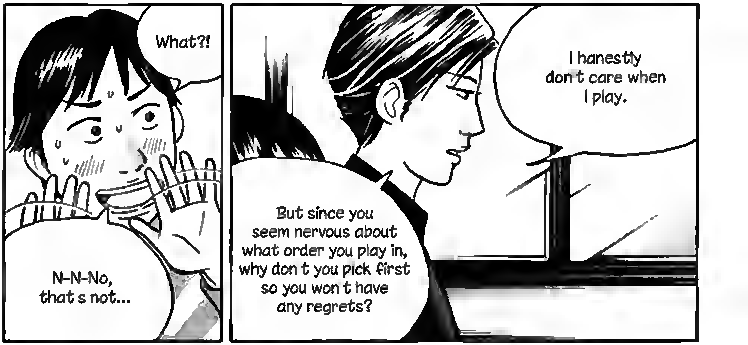

Looks like everyone's here!
I-...
.....
.....

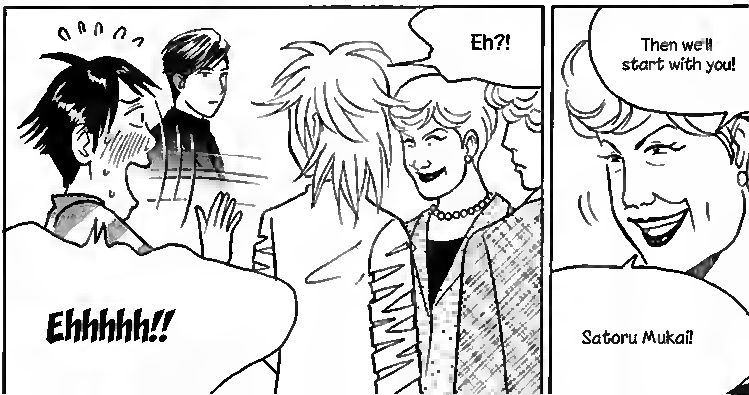

Ichinose-kun.


How's it going to be playing right in the middle of such an epic battle of wills?
But I suddenly realized...
You got lucky, huh!
I don't really want to be the main act here, so this works out just fine for me, but...

This is pointless.
A... bonus?
The more I think about it, the more I think going last... Just like some kind of bonus act... might just be best...
Alright, it doesn't matter who goes first, come and take your pick!!
I don't mind.
What?
Go ahead!
Your order is written inside.


Why don't you take the first pick, Mukai-san?
What? Me?
Hm?
What shall we do? Do we need a draw to decide the order of the draw?
What?
My rehearsal was last after all. I'll pick whichever is left over.


What?!
N-N-No, that's not...
I hanestly don't care when I play.
But since you seem nervous about what order you play in, why don't you pick first so you won't have any regrets?


Ehhhhh!!
Eh?!
Then we'll start with you!
Satoru Mukai!

AAAAARGH...
THIS IS BAD !!!!
URG HHH...
OK !
AHHHH...
trembletrembletrembletrembletremble
HAAAAAAA
Snip
Snip
Snip
Snip

Oh!!
Number 1!
1
You're going
first, Satoru!!
1
. . . . . .
Let's not
waste time
on this. Just
get it over
with.
How about
you go next,
Ichinose-kun.

Snip
Snip
Snip
Snip
I'll take this one.
OK
Slide
Slide
Then, allow me.
3
You're number 3, Kai!
Let's see here,
Wei Pang is...
Snip
Snip
Snip
Snip
Snip

Which means, Lech... You are...
2
Number 2!
The final act.
...And so the final day began.
"What?" END

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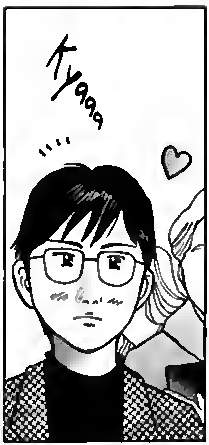
Chapter 204

The "Truth" About Wei Pang

THE NUMBER OF ATTENDEES, WHICH HAS BEEN GROWING DAY BY DAY, HAS REACHED A PEAK TODAY...
THE LAST DAY OF THE FINALS

Yayyy!!! Pang is playing after all!!
ESPCIALLY WHEN ALL THE MOST NOTABLE CONTESTANTS WILL BE PERFORMING TODAY


Kyaaa

The performance Schedule for Today

6:00 ~	No. 44	Satoru MUKAI (JAPONIA/JAPAN)
6:35 ~	No. 48	Wei PANG (CHINY/CHINA)

Intermission - 30 minutes

7:50 ~	No. 37	Kai ICHINOSE (JAPONIA/JAPAN)
8:35 ~	No. 54	Lech SZYMANOWSKI (POLSKA/POLAND)

THIS JUST GOES WITHOUT SAYING

Mom, Ichinose is the third to play!

I'll call Dad.

I guess I'll send Dad a photo of today's schedule.

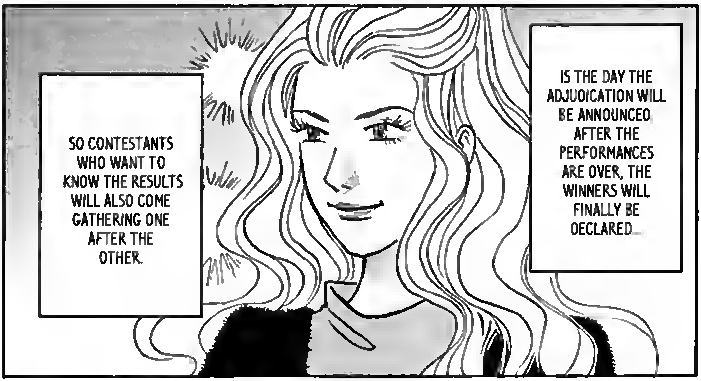
This is wonderful ♡ Pang made it back from China...

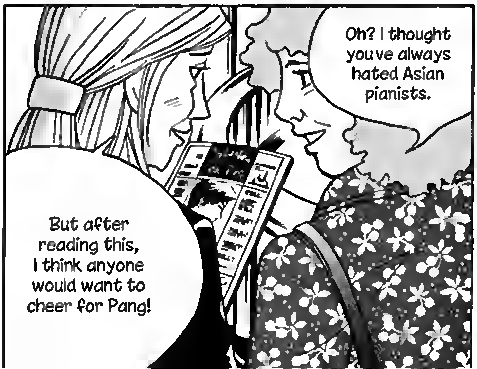
To the final!

He's playing second today.

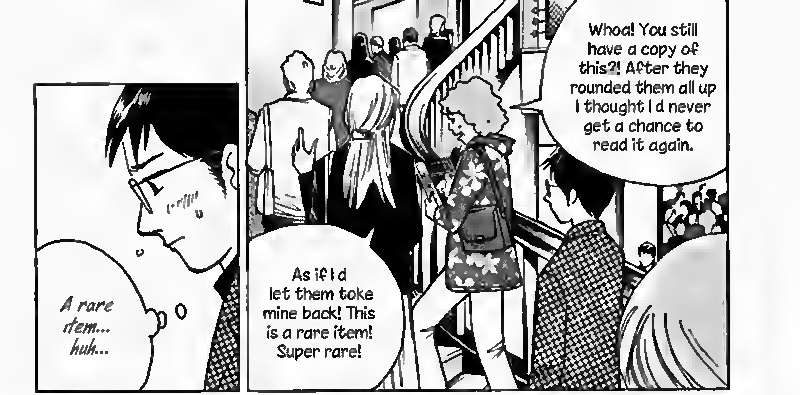
Sophie Ormesson...

BUT EVEN IF THAT WEREN'T THE CASE TODAY


SO CONTESTANTS WHO WANT TO KNOW THE RESULTS WILL ALSO COME GATHERING ONE AFTER THE OTHER.
IS THE DAY THE ADJUDICATION WILL BE ANNOUNCED. AFTER THE PERFORMANCES ARE OVER, THE WINNERS WILL FINALLY BE DECLARED...

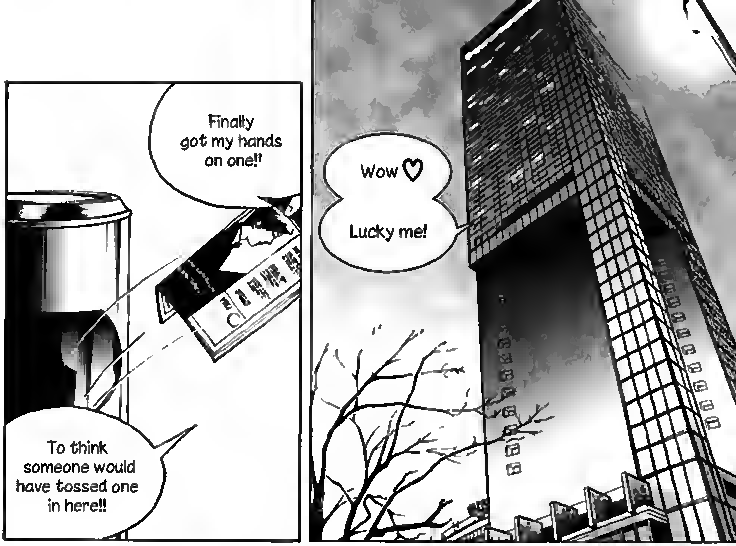

But after reading this, I think anyone would want to cheer for Pang!
Oh? I thought you've always hated Asian pianists.

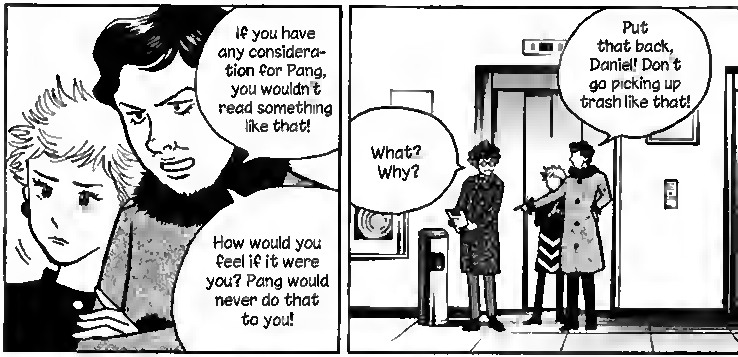
Pang is obviously going to win!


Whoa! You still have a copy of this?! After they rounded them all up I thought I'd never get a chance to read it again.
As if I'd let them take mine back! This is a rare item! Super rare!
A rare item... huh...

THAT BIZARRE ARTICLE TITLED "THE TRUTH ABOUT WEI PANG" IS STILL FLOATING AROUND EVEN TO THIS DAY...
The Truth About Wei Pang

Dad
I'll try my best to make it in time for Pang's performance!
Just what I figured he'd say.
Oh... Dad sent a response...
BUZZ


Finally got my hands on one!!
To think someone would have tossed one in here!!
Wow ♡
Lucky me!


If you have any consideration for Pang, you wouldn't read something like that!
How would you feel if it were you? Pang would never do that to you!
Put that back, Daniel! Don't go picking up trash like that!
What? Why?

But I'm a huge fan of Pang!
Anything about him is a huge treasure to me!
Well, you're right about that.
I'm not even a mote of dust in Pang's eye.

Allegra Granados!!
Just forget about that. Give it here!
Whoa!
Oh...
Yes!
I'll head over ta the hall after dropping him off with my husband downstairs!
He's so tiny~
Wow, so cute ♡
Hi
Allegra!! You have a baby?!
Glance

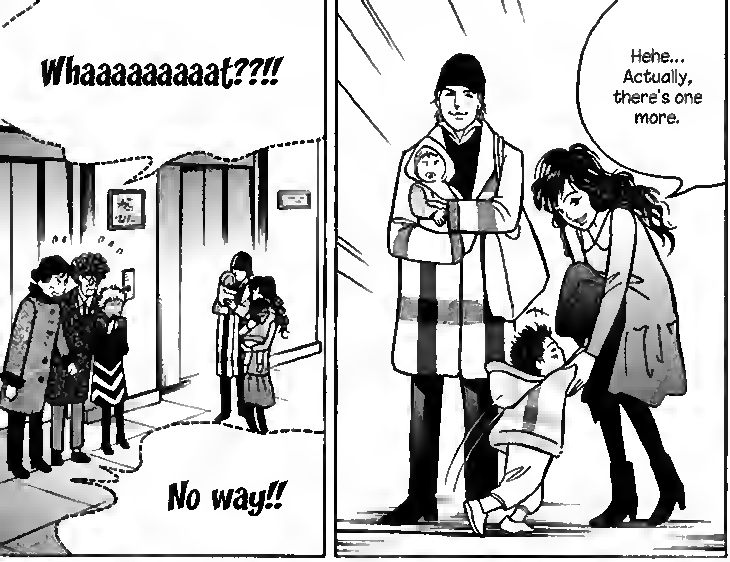
Anyway, we were just throwing this away!
No...!!

Ah!
A....

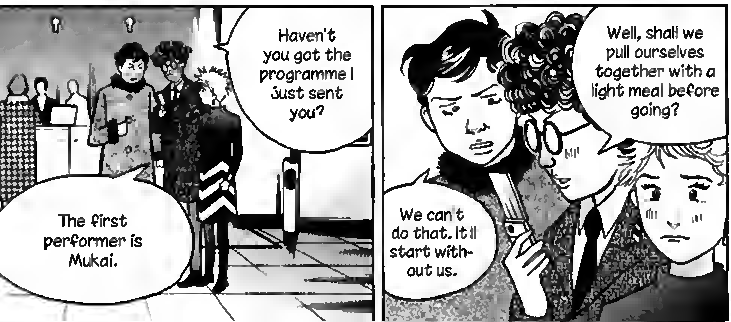
.....
.....
.....
Suck Suck Suck

.....
.....
.....
I can't win against that~
Ahaha, is that the only reason?

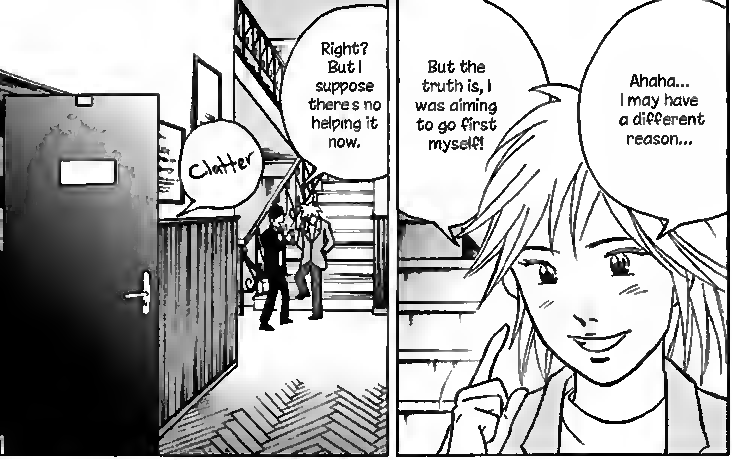
A...Amazing, Allegra.
So your robust piano style comes from the strength of being a mother!

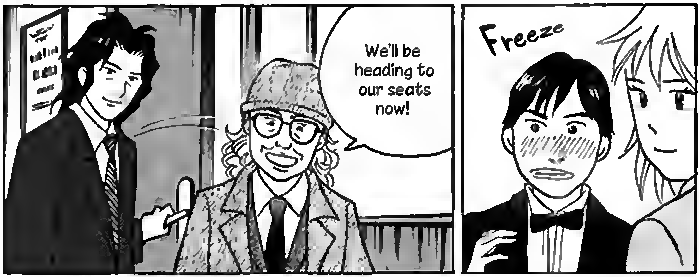

Whaaaaaaaaat??!!
No way!!
Hehe... Actually, there's one more.

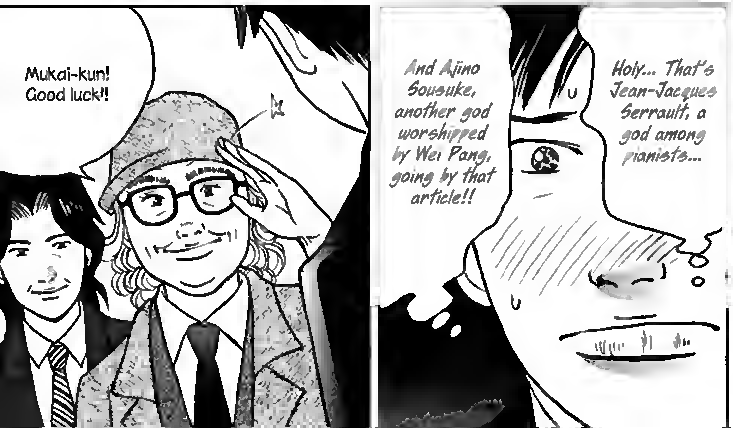
That's a shock. She's the same age as me...


Haven't you got the programme I just sent you?
The first performer is Mukai.
Well, shall we pull ourselves together with a light meal before going?
We can't do that. It'll start without us.

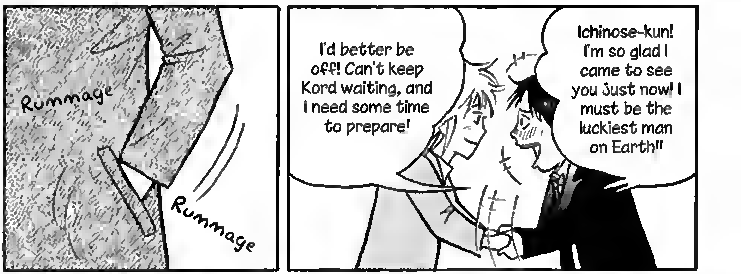
Man, I gotta say I really got lucky!
I totally freaked out when I first knew I'd be going first, but...
After all, if I get my performance out of the way first, I can relax and enjoy everyone else's performances!
But when I'd calmed down a little and thought about it, I realized this is probably for the best!


Ahaha... I may have a different reason...
But the truth is, I was aiming to go first myself!
Right? But I suppose there's no helping it now.
Clatter


We'll be heading to our seats now!
Freeze

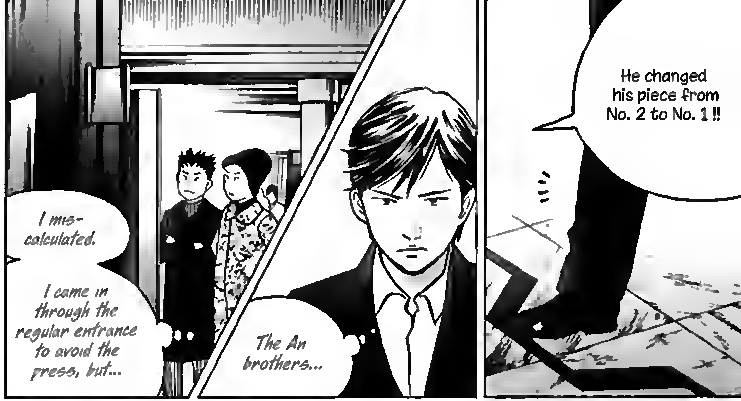

Holy... That's Jean-Jacques Serrault, a god among pianists...
And Ajino Sousuke, another god worshipped by Wei Pang, going by that article!!
Mukai-kun! Good luck!!

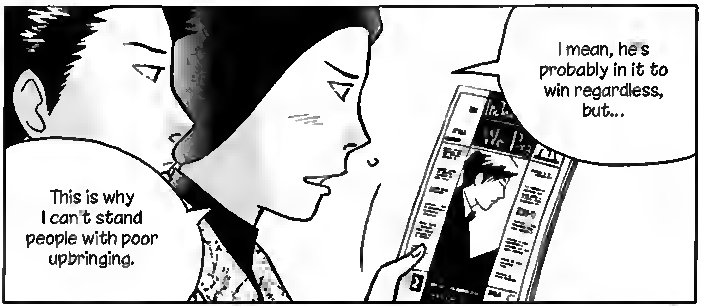
I'll give it all I've got!!
Thank you so much!!
Th...


Rummage
Rummage
I'd better be off! Can't keep Kord waiting, and I need some time to prepare!
Ichinose-kun! I'm so glad I came to see you just now! I must be the luckiest man on Earth!!

Huhhh?
Huh?

Yes... How strange. I could have sworn I had it with me.
I hope I hadn't left it in Kai's waiting room...
What's wrong? Are you missing your ticket?
But more importantly, take a look at this.
ANG
KONCERT
Pang's just screwing with everyone.
Well, I kinda figured that'd happen.
Dammit. Pang actually made it back in time!


I mis-calculated.
I came in through the regular entrance to avoid the press, but...
The An brothers...
He changed his piece from No. 2 to No. 1 !!

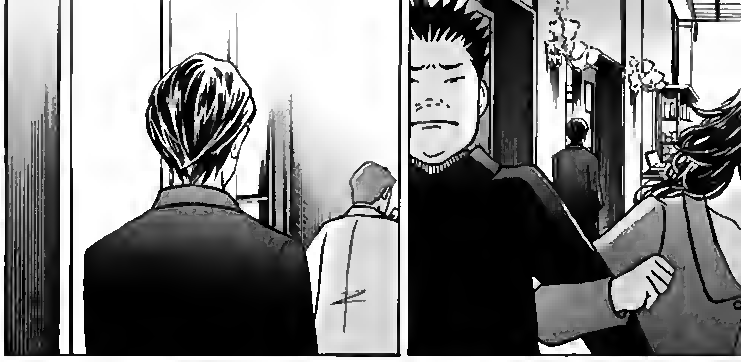

This is why I can't stand people with poor upbringing.
I mean, he's probably in it to win regardless, but...

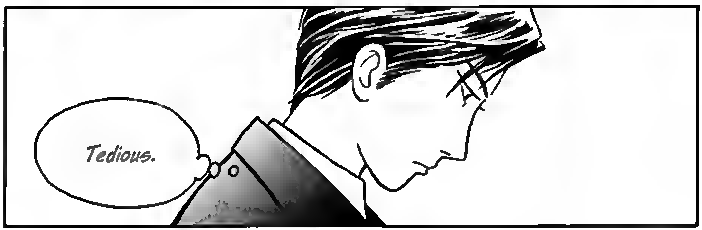
If it's made up, then it's even worse.
But come on, that's got to be full of lies.
Ahh... That's the thing you picked up earlier.

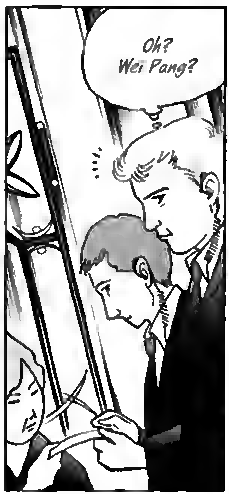
But this article isn't him talking. It's his dying foster father!
It's pretty amazing that a guy who's on his deathbed could talk this much.
Completely unloved... A pitiful childhood... Man, I can't believe they'd publicize this kind of stuff.
Who'd have thought he'd want to make a tragic hero of himself so badly!
That's true!
That article smells fishy.
Here she comes! Boob-lady Granados!

She probably thought being born in that place would be nothing short of living Hell.
Do you seriously think that any mother would kill herself because she hates her child?
Wouldn't it make much more sense if the mother was trying to protect her beloved son by dying together with him?
Based on this article, it didn't seem like his mother had the capability to make decisions like that...
B...But... Ms Granados,
Well,
That is the very proof that it is in a mother's natural instinct to protect her own child...
Even if she has to turn against God to do so.

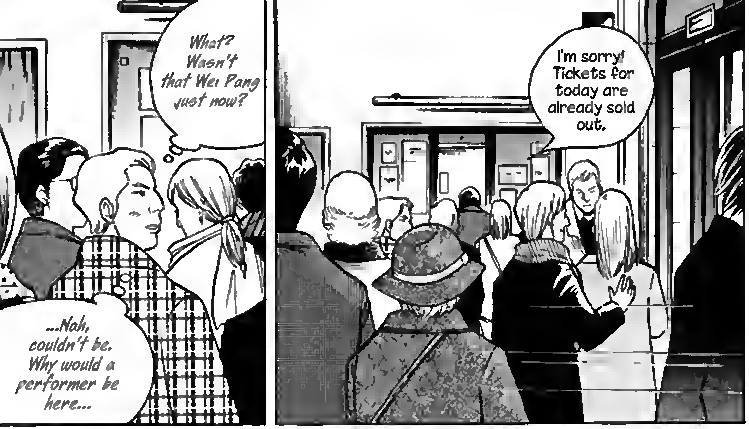
Well... Either way, isn't it wonderful that Wei Pang survived?!
Thanks to that, we can enjoy his music!
Hahaha... I suppose it's a little early for you boys to understond things like that...
Did you get a good look at the programme?
The first guy is that weird Japanese. We weren't planning on listening to him.
Now let's get going! It's going to start!
I don't want to hear that from you
Well, you guys are also weird Koreans!
If all the seats are gone, I'm blaming you two!
Forget about that and let's just go!



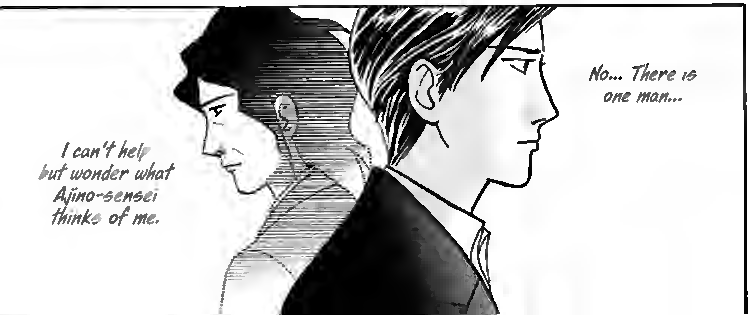

Tedious.


Oh?
Wei Pang?

I suppose everyone has read that article by now.
It's something I would have liked to keep to myself, but...


What? Wasn't that Wei Pang just now?
...Nah, couldn't be. Why would a performer be here...
I'm sorry! Tickets for today are already sold out.

But at this point, I don't really care.
No matter what everyone thinks about me...


No... There is one man...
I can't help but wonder what Ajino-sensei thinks of me.

Would this article wound him?!
How did he feel, reading this?!
Would he find my existence vexing...?!!
Now that this article is out... Can I even appear before him?!
Or perhaps he hasn't read it yet?!
I couldn't stop these foolish thoughts from buzzing around my head...
While I was confined...
So I simply decided to assume that he had read it...

And show the world how magnificent your music is...
With my own hands!
In that case...
There is only one thing to do: Completely defeat Ichinose using Ajino Sousuke's piano style!
If I do that...
Will I be able to show my face before him?!
Clap
Clap
Clap
Clap
Clap
Clap
CHOPIN

His piece is Concerto No. 2.
In F minor, Op. 21
First movement Maestoso,
That's why...

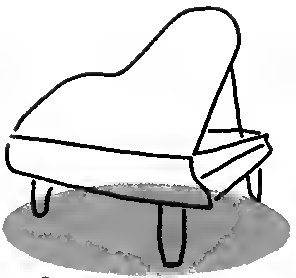
That's why I want to play it as soon as possible!
The No. 1 that will bring down Ichinose...

Second movement: Larghetto,
Third movement: Allegro Vivace
I can't face Ajino-sensei until then!!
The only man who will ever be my master...
His piano of choice is Yamaha!

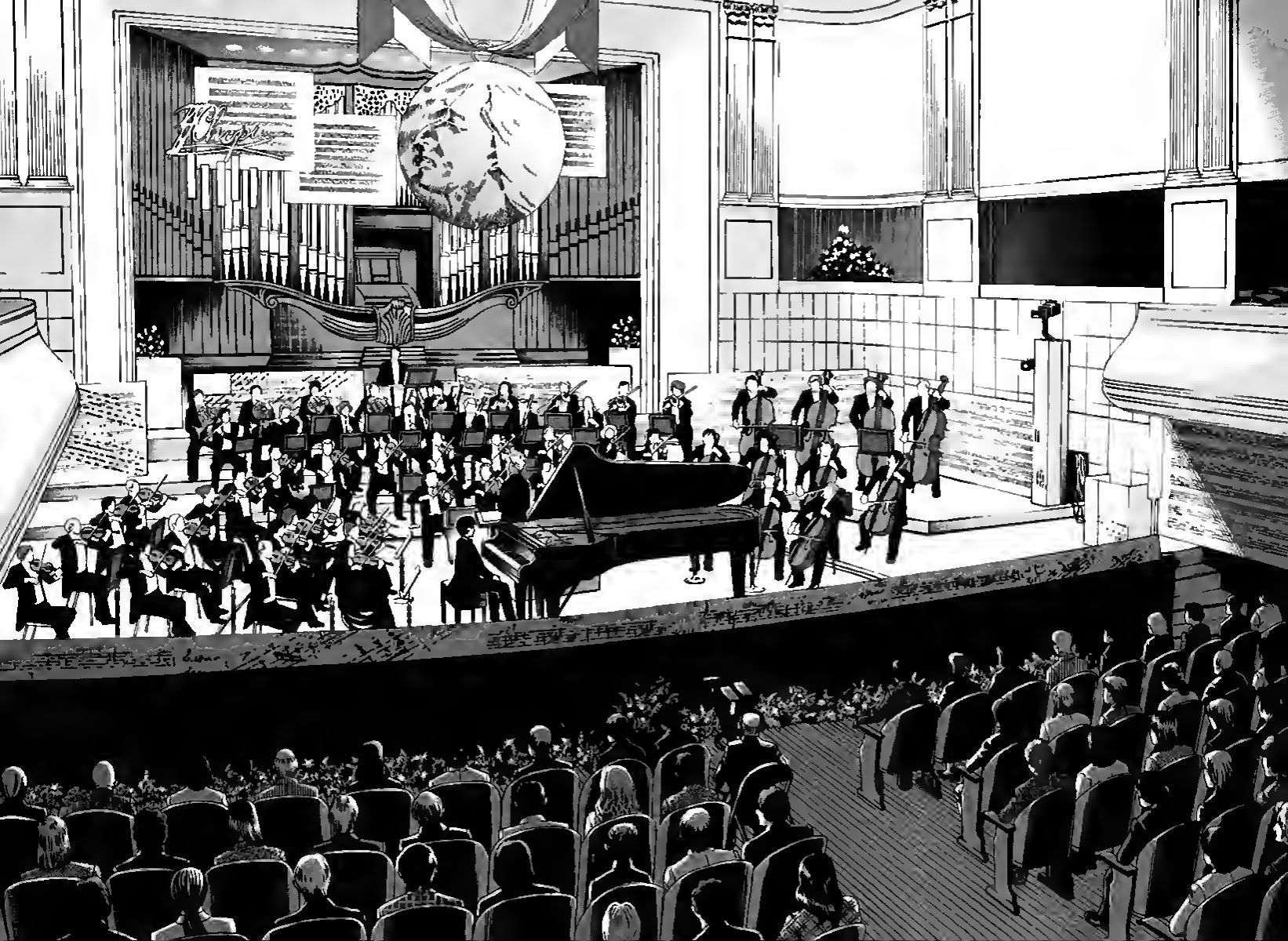
No. 44,
Satoru Mukai,
Japan!
I can't face him.

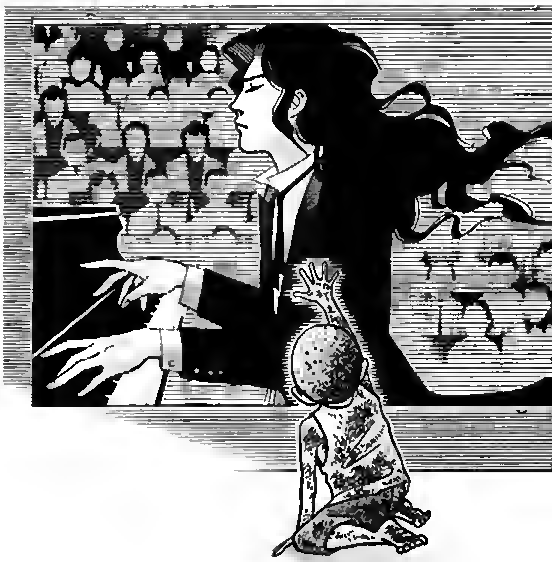
The "Truth" About Wei Pang END

Easy Going Scans



The Perfect World of KAI


F.Chopin



Chapter 205 Ajino-sensei

The piano that will defeat Ichinose...
I haven't...
I haven't played it yet!

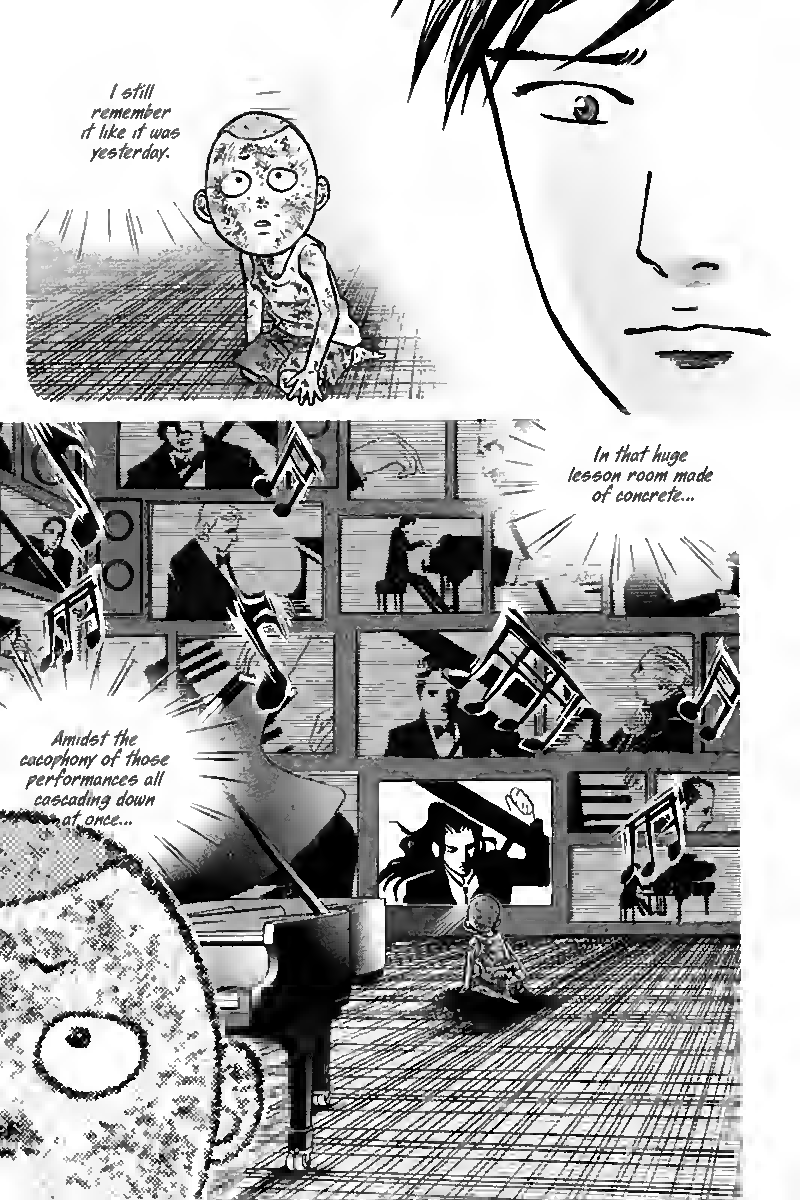
I haven't played it yet!!!
CONCERTO NO 2
IN F MINOR, OP 21

LAST DAY OF THE FINALS
FIRST PERFORMER
NO. 44 SATORU MUKAI
(JAPAN)
My body...
Seems to be paralyzed...
I can't move.

THUD
THUD
Sensei!
My mind is blank...
I feel miles away...
Sensei!
Sensei!!

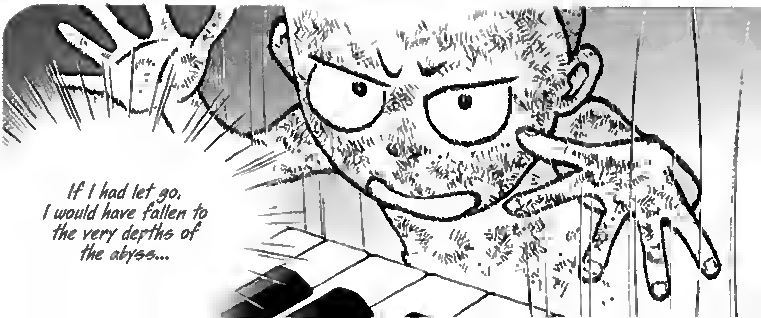
Until I came to know your piano playing...

I was called a "Bomb" and lived like trash.


I still remember it like it was yesterday.
In that huge lesson room made of concrete...
Amidst the cacophony of those performances all cascading down at once...

Your notes were the only ones I chased after frantically...
I wanted to grasp them.

Your music was a single thread of spider silk that extended down to me in Hell...

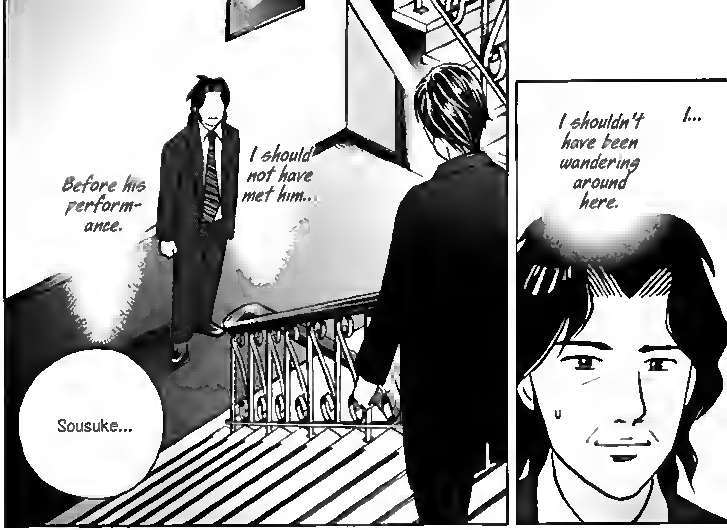

If I had let go, I would have fallen to the very depths of the abyss...

My soul won't stop screaming...
Sensei!
Sensei!
That thread...

Sensei.
Se...
Ie... going to be cut!!

Aôino-sensei!

So he might not know anything about me yet.
Sensei...
Wei Pang.
There's still a chance that Sensei hasn't read that article.
No. Sensei...

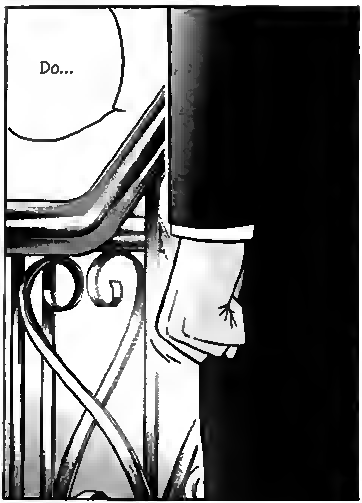

Before his perform-ance.
I should not have met him..
Sousuke...
I shouldn't have been wandering around here.
I...

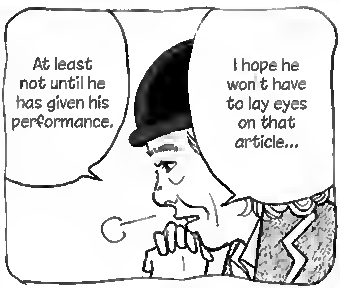
Even if we assume this article is telling the truth...
What will I do? I'll act normally.
What will you do if you run into Pang?

I'm just an ordinary piano teacher now.
I'm no longer the pianist he worshiped...

If that's really the case, what will you do?
Perhaps, like me, he learned it just so he could talk with you...
I've heard he's fluent in Japanese...
I don't know if he'd see it that way...
I think he'd want to speak with you, Sousuke.
You're not exactly the type to go in with a plan, Sousuke.
Well... I suppose you're right.
I'll just have to think of that when the time comes...
There must be something you want to tell him, right?
Even if you ask me that, there's nothing in particular I can think of to say to him.
...No...
I really should have thought of something to say back then.
Pang Wei-kun...
Mind if I call you that?

How may I help you...?
I should have borrowed some of Jean's wisdom...
I hope...


Do...


At least not until he has given his performance.
I hope he won't have to lay eyes on that article...

There's no way he would wish for such an article to be published.
Agreed.

Do you find...
Do you find my playing disagreeable, Sensei?

How could anyone ever find such superb piano playing disagreeable?
Of course not. Why would you say that?

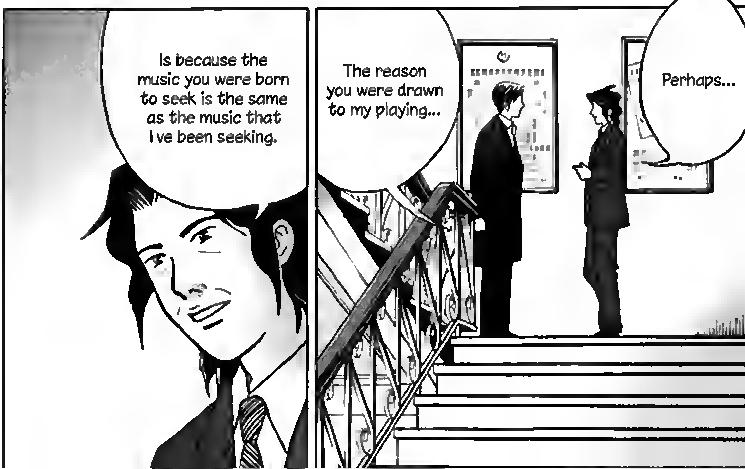
What?

That...
That's what he's been thinking about?!

If I hadn't encountered it, I wouldn't have survived.
Your music was my only lifeline.
Your music provided the foundation for my playing.
And... he's speaking under the assumption... that I've read it too...?
He... He must have already read that article.
Has already read the article.
So... Sensei...
If that's true... then I'm truly honored.

I want to inherit your music.
Permission?
Then, may I have your permission to keep playing the piano as I have up till now?
FIRST MOVEMENT
MAESTOSO
PIANO SOLO

Pang Wei-kun...


Perhaps...
The reason you were drawn to my playing...
Is because the music you were born to seek is the same as the music that I've been seeking.

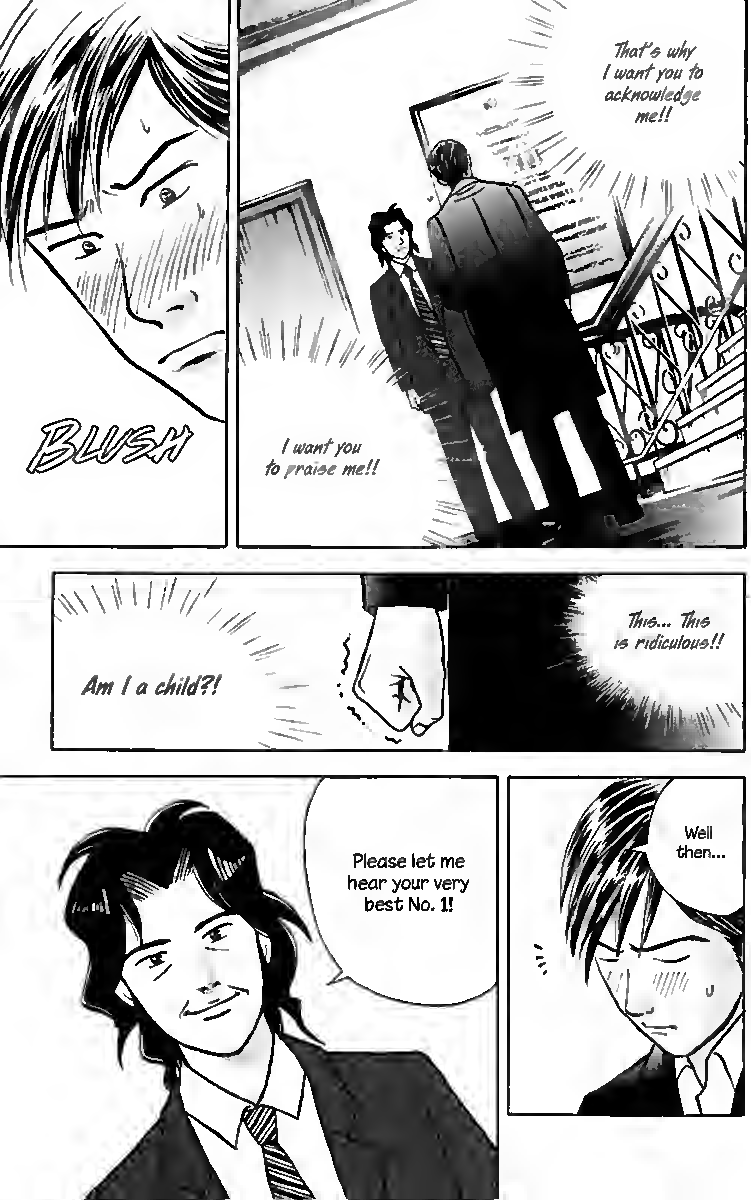
That's why your soul...
Reacted so strongly to my playing... Don't you think?
.....?
Then... My playing isn't something inherited from you...
But the music sought by my inner self to begin with..?
Unfortunately, I encountered a setback on my Journey to seek such music...
But you can still travel ahead!
So whyever would you need my permission?

But... But I... I have always believed that I was the only one to have inherited your playing...
In the entire world...

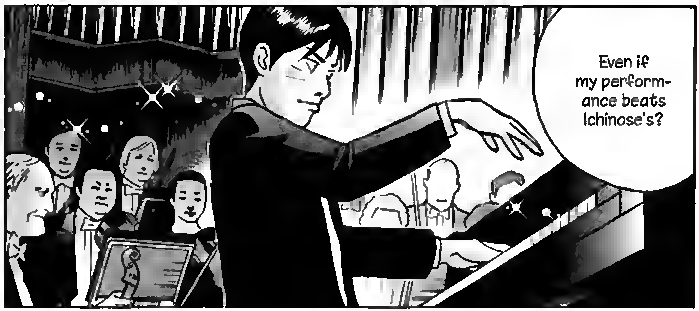
I came this far because of the pride of that knowledge.
Please don't leave me...
Please don't sever my only lifeline!

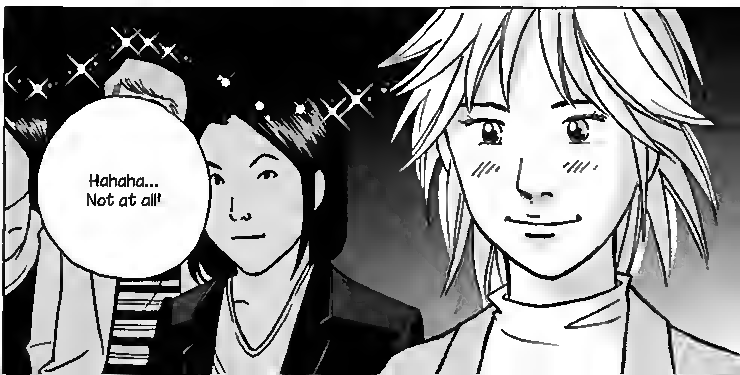
Please don't tell me that lifeline was just an illusion!!

I came this far...
Following in your footsteps!!


That's why I want you to acknowledge me!!
I want you to praise me!!
BLUSH
Am I a child?!
This... This is ridiculous!!
Well then...
Please let me hear your very best No. 1!

I'd like you to play without getting yourself worked up, and give the very best performance that Wei Pang the pianist is capable of.
But... But would it not bother you...


Even if my performance beats Ichinose's?


Hahaha... Not at all!

I want to see where you'll go from here.
Pang Wei-kun...
Play to your absolute limits!
Which is why...
I want to see how the music that I've been seeking will evolve.

I would like you to pursue your own course fearlessly, and play...

To your heart's content!
END

The Perfect World of KAI

Music Assistance / Shimoda Koji
Information Provider / Chopin Ltd. - "Chopin" Magazine Editorial Department
With references to "Piano Practice Room" by Kobayashi Jin (Shunjusha Publishing Co.)
"To Listen, To Play - Commentary on Chopin's Works" by Shimoda Koji (Chopin)

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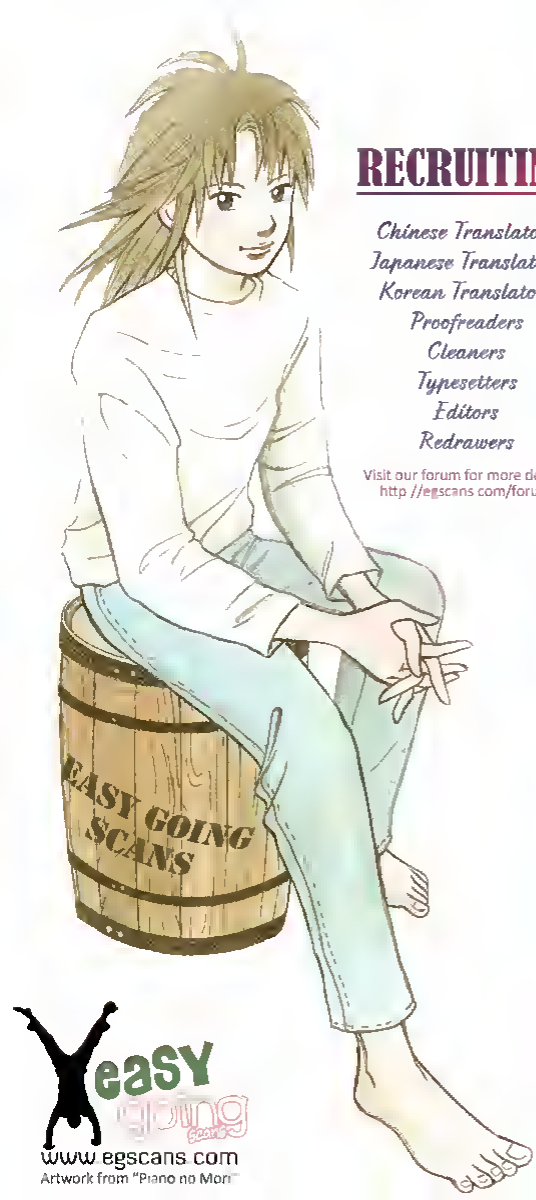
To be continued in Volume 23



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